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Inquiry, Critique, and the Intelligible
An Interpretation of Horkheimer's Liturgical Turn

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Abstract

Max Horkheimer's mature works on theology and Schopenhauerian metaphysics have been portrayed by subsequent critical theorists as an illicit regression from his earlier social theory in a two-fold sense. First, his concern to reflect on empirical experience is replaced with speculation regarding intelligible concepts, i.e. concepts that do not arise from observation on the basis of sense-intuition but are rather products of "pure" reason (God) or the imagination (Schopenhauer's will). Second, his advocacy of the Enlightenment as an emancipatory political project is replaced by its skeptical critique.

I argue that this consensus radically misunderstands the concerns animating the late Horkheimer insofar as his reflections on intelligible concepts are both intimately related to a continuing concern with empirical inquiry, as well as an outworking of his commitment to the realization of the Enlightenment. The argument is presented in three related movements. In the first, I interpret Horkheimer's *oeuvre* in terms of his pervasive interest in developing a materialist logic. I begin by outlining his early understanding of thought as a form of inquiry for embodied social subjects (chapter 1), before noting how, in his mature theorizing, this account serves as a basis for a presentation of the relationship between various kinds of inquiry and the practice of social critique (chapter 2). In the second, I contend that Horkheimer's critique of instrumental reason is best understood as congruent with this materialist logic, not as a speculative departure from an earlier concern with empirical inquiry. I begin by examining Horkheimer's empirical analysis of how historical changes in the basic institutions defining political economy in modern life affect the reasoning habits of subjects (chapter 3). I then turn to his diagnosis of the way such changes affect the self-understanding of modern subjects, leading to a pervasive form of alienation (chapter 4).

In the final movement, I present Horkheimer's turn to theological concepts of the intelligible as a therapeutic response to this alienation. First, I examine his understanding of the content of theological concepts as well as how such concepts may be preserved in a form appropriate to modern life (chapter 5), and conclude by illustrating his own attempt at such a retrieval in his late reflections on the Jewish liturgy (chapter 6).

In the conclusion, I note that this interpretation offers a constructive challenge to philosophers concerned with the tradition of critical theory. On the one hand, Horkheimer articulates what would be required for the fulfillment of the Enlightenment project in terms critical theorists will recognize as their own, by offering an account of the social practices that are necessary for the self-determination of the subject. Yet his presentation contests a fundamental axiom of such theorists regarding the role intelligible concepts ought to play in seeking this goal. Horkheimer defends an account of the significance of the liturgy for practices of reasoning that is quiet foreign to such theorists. Instead of setting liturgical reasoning over against a militantly "secular" Enlightenment, he demonstrates that such reasoning is integral to its fulfillment.

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Introduction

Inquiry and the Intelligible: Interpreting Horkheimer's liturgical turn

Central to the identity of contemporary critical theorists is an account of the intellectual development of the original director of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, Max Horkheimer. Second-generation theorists draw upon a history of his thought to illuminate a central question guiding their own research, “what is the normative standpoint of critical theory?”¹ Horkheimer's movement over the course of his lifetime as a theoretician has often been presented by such theorists as a three-fold attempt to answer the “normativity” question, the failure of which serves as a foil situating their own contemporary efforts. The root of this interpretive approach may be traced to Helmut Dubiel's monumental study, *Wissenschaftsorganisation und politische Erfahrung: Studien zur frühen Kritischen Theorie* (1978).² An investigation of subsequent literature demonstrates that dependence on Dubiel's study is ubiquitous among those who have attempted to interpret and develop Horkheimer's original project.³

¹ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 222. Richard Wolin similarly notes in “Critical Theory and the Dialectic of Rationalism,” *New German Critique*, no. 41 (Spring-Summer 1987): 23, “The problem of a viable normative foundation for critical theory is clearly at the heart of the most vital contemporary debates concerning the legacy of the Frankfurt School.” The discussion of “grounding” in treatments of Horkheimer's early essays is symptomatic of this interest in normativity. For instances, note John Duane Abromeit, “The Dialectic of Bourgeois Society: An Intellectual Biography of the Young Max Horkheimer, 1895-1937” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2004), 457, 465-467; Thomas McCarthy, “On the Idea of a Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory*, by David Cousins Hoy and Thomas McCarthy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 27; Axel Honneth, “Max Horkheimer and the Sociological Deficit of Critical Theory,” trans. Kenneth Baynes, in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, eds. Seyla Benhabib et. al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 187; Hauke Brunkhorst, “Dialectical Positivism of Happiness: Horkheimer's Materialist Deconstruction of Philosophy,” trans. John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer*, 87; John Grumley, *History and Totality: Radical Historicism from Hegel to Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 162.

² Helmut Dubiel, *Wissenschaftsorganisation und politische Erfahrung: Studien zur frühen Kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978). I will reference the English translation: *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, trans. Benjamin Gregg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

³ John O'Neill and Thomas Uebel, “Horkheimer and Neurath: Restarting a Disrupted Debate,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (April 2004): 99, n. 19, use the language of “canonical” to describe the reception of Dubiel's work among critical theorists. For explicit instances of dependency, note: Habermas, “Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer's Work,” trans. Kenneth Baynes and John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer*, 52; Georg Lohmann, “The Failure of Self Realization,” trans. Kenneth

In this dissertation, I propose to offer an alternative heuristic to Dubiel, which, I shall argue, better captures the central concerns of Horkheimer's mature work. To set the stage, I shall first outline Dubiel's interpretation. Then I will discuss its development by subsequent theorists in a review of the state of contemporary research on the "normativity" deficit supposedly characterizing Horkheimer's critical theory. Finally, I shall outline the alternative I propose to defend in subsequent chapters.

Dubiel describes the development of Horkheimer's theory as passing through three distinguishable stages: a "materialist period" (1930-1937), a "Critical Theory period" (1937-1940), and a period in which theory served as a "mental preserve" for the members of the School, by which he references the turn of the school towards philosophy and away from empirical research (1940-). Each of these periods, notes Dubiel, embodies distinct approaches to understanding the relationship between philosophy and the sciences,

Whereas the materialist period considered philosophy the integrating medium of interdisciplinary theory construction (and sought, programmatically, the unification of philosophy and science), and, whereas the Critical Theory period took Marx's economic critique as the orienting, paradigmatic unity of philosophy and the specialized sciences, in [the] third period philosophy is a mental preserve, a critical island, an encapsulation resistant to the instrumentalized *Zeitgeist*. Philosophy defines its role as one of resistance to the specialized sciences.⁴

In the first period, according to Dubiel, philosophical reflection and empirical research have "reciprocal functions" for Horkheimer.⁵ By this, Dubiel means that theoretical formulations both guide and in turn are modified by inquiry, so that "[t]he specialized sciences...provide an empirical corrective to philosophy."⁶ In the second period, Horkheimer understands the relationship between philosophy and science in a one-sided

Baynes and John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer*, 388-389, 408 n. 3, 409 n. 4; Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 152.

⁴ Dubiel, *Theory and Politics*, 95. For similar formulations, note 9-10 and 105-106.

⁵ Ibid., 106

⁶ Ibid, 105-106.

fashion: Marx's economic theory is privileged as a presentation of the whole which determines the meaning of the otherwise indeterminate findings of the specialized sciences. Finally, in his collaborative work with Adorno, most notably in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Horkheimer abandons the specialized sciences altogether as examples of an instrumental form of reasoning that must be resisted root and branch by the theorist.

It is hard to overestimate how foundational this portrait has been for subsequent interpreters of Horkheimer. Theorists may differ with Dubiel on the details of his account, yet rarely do they question the fundamental premise that Horkheimer turns away from empirical inquiry and towards speculative philosophy and theological metaphysics in his mature work. In each of the following four influential interpreters, the central premise of Dubiel's original account, his portrayal of the late "philosophical" Horkheimer as a turn away from the early "empirical" Horkheimer, is left in place, despite the careful attempt of several theorists to critique other details of Dubiel's work.

Questioning Dubiel's division between Horkheimer's "materialist" and "critical theory" phases, Martin Jay has examined the sharp division between Horkheimer's "early" commitment to scientific inquiry and his "later" privileging of a Marxist philosophy of history, noting that, as late as "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1937), Horkheimer wrote as if a "totalistic knowledge of society could still be gained through the interdisciplinary methods promoted in [his] 1931 inaugural address [as the director for the *Institut für Sozialforschung*]." Yet Jay concludes that once "the essential incoherence" of the idea of a possible totalistic knowledge of the whole became evident in the face of the overwhelming failure of proletarian class-consciousness to emerge, "Critical Theory began to withdraw more and more into philosophy alone as the

repository of negation.”⁷ While Jay questions the downplaying of empirical inquiry in the second of Dubiel’s two periods, the idea that Horkheimer eventually shifts from empirical study to abstract philosophical speculation in order to ground his social critique is reaffirmed.

In stark contrast to Jay, Hauke Brunkhorst argues that from the outset of his career Horkheimer implicitly relies on a rationalist account of universal human interests that should organize society. These human interests, notes Brunkhorst, are ultimately inextricable from a metaphysical account of human nature.⁸ Thus, Brunkhorst goes on to suggest, the early Horkheimer was not as committed to the dialectical interpenetration of theory and inquiry as Dubiel had originally thought. On the one hand, he coupled an emphasis on the empirical social sciences with a “nominalistic” critique of metaphysics.⁹ On the other, his account of universal human interests drew on a philosophical anthropology which was nothing if not metaphysical, the idea of “humanity’s universal longing for happiness and fulfillment,” a concept which lent “a peculiarly normative force” to Horkheimer’s early critique.¹⁰ Thus his writings are “eclectic and inconsistent in the 1930s.”¹¹ Brunkhorst concludes that Horkheimer’s work was *never*, from its inception, consistently committed to empirical inquiry over against philosophical speculation. The shift from empirical to rationalist concepts is

⁷ Martin Jay, “Positive and Negative Totalities: Implicit Tensions in Critical Theory’s Vision of Interdisciplinary Research,” in *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from America to Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 110. The rupture in the verum-factum principle supposed by the idea of class consciousness is often understood as the cause for Horkheimer’s turn to a pessimistic philosophy of history in the 1940s: Habermas, “Development of Horkheimer’s Work,” 52, 54; Michael Löwy, “Partisan Truth: Knowledge and Social Classes in Critical Theory,” in *Foundations of the Frankfurt School of Social Research*, eds. Judith Marcus and Zoltán Tar (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 302; Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 150, 156; Dubiel, *Theory and Politics*, 85-86.

⁸ Brunkhorst, “Dialectical Positivism,” 87. For a similar argument, see earlier interpreters such as David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 198 and Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 153.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

presaged in his earliest work, thus the claim that he increasingly abandoned such study, is, if anything, *more* plausible than Dubiel's presentation suggests.

Turning to the "critical theory" period, the present director of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, Axel Honneth, develops Dubiel's understanding of the "critical theory" period as characterized by empirical analysis that is over-determined by theory.

Honneth argues that Horkheimer's Marxist philosophy of history relies upon a reductive conception of the human as *homo laborans* that neglects the findings of sociology.¹² Thus he reaffirms Dubiel's claim that Horkheimer increasingly relies on philosophical concepts to the exclusion of his early commitment to social scientific inquiry.

Before turning to the fourth interpreter I wish to examine, I shall offer a concluding observation on the previous three. There is near universal agreement, exemplified by Jay, Braukhorst, and Honneth, that what Dubiel terms the "third" period in Horkheimer's work embodies a retreat away from empirical study to philosophy. The contours of this turn, are widely agreed upon by subsequent interpreters. In the 40s, they argue, Horkheimer inverted his former commitment to Marx, turning with Adorno to ground social critique in a negative philosophy of history.¹³ Some add to this that his "turn" is initiated only after an abortive attempt to defend pre-critical metaphysics in *Eclipse of Reason*.¹⁴ While this later nuance illustrates that Horkheimer's reflections on

¹² Honneth, "Sociological Deficit," 187, 191. I shall discuss Honneth further in chapter 1, section 1.

¹³ For the standard description of Horkheimer's turn from an interest in empirical research in the 30s to a speculative philosophy of history in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, note Dubiel, *Theory and Politics*, 81, 92-93, 95-96. For other rehearsals, note Grumley, *History and Totality*, 178 and Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 83.

¹⁴ For the claim that *Eclipse of Reason* signals Horkheimer's embrace of Enlightenment rationalism as well as the approbation of antique metaphysics, note: Hans Joas, "An Underestimated Alternative: America and the Limits of 'Critical Theory,'" trans. Jeremy Gaines, in *Pragmatism and Social Critique*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 82; Stefan Breuer, "The Long Friendship: Theoretical Differences between Horkheimer and Adorno," trans. John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer*, 265; Georg Lohmann, "The Failure of Self Realization," 407; Richard Wolin, "Dialectic of Rationalism," 39-45. Some trace this rationalism back as early as "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1937): John O'Neill and Thomas Uebel, "Horkheimer and Neurath," 92-94; Michael Löwy, "Partisan Truth," 298-302; Herbert Schnädelbach, "Max Horkheimer and the Moral Philosophy of German Idealism," trans. John Torpey, in *On Max Horkheimer*, 299-301.

philosophy are not uniformly pessimistic, it simply corroborates Dubiel's claim that Horkheimer departs from empirical inquiry in favor of speculative metaphysics in the 40s.

Turning finally to Horkheimer's mature reflections on theology and Schopenhauer, Jürgen Habermas forwards what may be termed a "fourth" period as a kind of addendum standing in continuity with Dubiel's heuristic. In his influential essay, "To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning without God is a Futile Undertaking," Habermas notes that in the 60s and 70s Horkheimer turns finally to an account of theological metaphysics which, he claims, provides a standpoint from which to judge the viscidities of history. This turn is not distinguished sharply by Habermas from Horkheimer's earlier appeals to pre-critical metaphysics (in *Eclipse of Reason*) and negative philosophy of history (in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). Rather, Habermas presents it, as we shall see, as the natural *terminus* of Horkheimer's turn away from empirical inquiry.¹⁵

Now we are in a position to understand how this narrative of Horkheimer's various "periods" serves the central question informing subsequent generations of critical theorists regarding the "normative foundations" of critical theory. Horkheimer's movement away from empirical inquiry in search of a metaphysical account of the grounds of social critique contrasts neatly with the self-understanding of subsequent theorists, who present their own "post-metaphysical" solution to the problem of

¹⁵ Habermas, "To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning without God is a Futile Undertaking: Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer," in *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran P. Cronin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 133-146. For various rehearsals of this interpretation, note Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 74; O'Neill and Uebel, "Horkheimer and Neurath," 93; Jay M. Bernstein, "Critical Theory - the Very Idea: Reflections on Nihilism and Domination," in *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1995), 24; Breuer, "The Long Friendship," 276; Timothy Tessin, "The Frankfurt School," *Philosophical Investigations* 19, no. 4 (October 1996): 336; Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, 210; Brian J. Shaw, "Reason, Nostalgia, and Eschatology in the Critical Theory of Max Horkheimer," *The Journal of Politics* 47, no. 1 (February 1985): 161; Tom Bottomore, *The Frankfurt School* (London: Tavistock, 1984), 30, 41; Martin Jay, "Max Horkheimer and the Retreat from Hegelian Marxism," in *Marxism and Totality: the Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 219; Held, *Introduction*, 198-199; Dick Howard, *The Marxian Legacy* (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 81-82, 115.

justification against the foil of the late Horkheimer. Minimally, subsequent theorists signal by the elusive term “post-metaphysical” that the normative grounds they seek are *empirical* in a way which is qualitatively different from Horkheimer’s own mature theorizing. Thus, for instance, in the conclusion to his aforementioned interpretive essay, Habermas draws a distinction between his own work and Horkheimer’s which turns on the *kinds of grounds* to which both appeal in order to repair the normativity deficit. While Horkheimer increasingly appeals to intelligible ideas like God to anchor the normativity of his claims, Habermas notes that his own work makes a more modest appeal to the necessary form of speech acts, thus anchoring normativity in an empirically observable feature of human communication,

The ideal moment of unconditionality is deeply rooted in the factual processes of communication because validity claims are Janus faced: as universal, they outstrip every given context; at the same time they must be raised and gain acceptance here and now if they are to sustain an agreement capable of coordinating action. In communicative action, we orient ourselves to validity claims that we can raise only as a matter of fact in the context of *our* language, of *our* form of life, whereas the redeemability implicitly co-positing points beyond the provinciality of a given historical context.¹⁶

Interestingly, the distinction which Habermas traces between himself and the later Horkheimer in this passage is equivalent to the distinction he postulates elsewhere *within Horkheimer’s own work*, between the early Horkheimer and the later Horkheimer. The early Horkheimer’s “sublation (*Aufhebung*) of philosophy in social theory,” notes Habermas, “constitutes an original, anti-Heideggerian response to the ‘end of metaphysics.’” The later Horkheimer, however, turns in the 1940s to a metaphysically inflected “negativistic philosophy of history.”¹⁷ It should be no surprise that Habermas identifies his own project as a continuation of the interest in empirical inquiry

¹⁶ Habermas, “To Seek to Salvage,” 145-146, his emphasis.

¹⁷ Habermas, “Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer’s Work,” *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, trs. Kenneth Baynes and John McCole, eds. Seyla Benhabib, Wolfgang Bonß, and John McCole (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1993) 50-51.

characterizing the early Horkheimer, thus demonstrating the aforementioned importance of reflection on Horkheimer to the self-understanding of subsequent critical theorists.¹⁸

The difference between the early and mature Horkheimers, as well as between the mature Horkheimer and Habermas, is, according to Habermas, fundamentally related to the kind of standpoint they offer the critic. At issue is not how normativity relates to history or whether one should query the transcendental basis of human activity as a ground for social critique. Rather what is at issue is simply the type of standpoint to which critical claims should appeal. In understanding critique as an appeal to the preconditions of the empirical practice of communication, there is thus no difference, Habermas thinks, between his own and Horkheimer's account of *what critique requires*, only a difference in the *empirical status* of the diverse standpoints to which they appeal.

Contemporary critical theorists, we may conclude, uniformly distinguish Horkheimer's early interest in a materialist account of empirical inquiry from his late concern with philosophy, as if in the former Horkheimer emphasizes the historical and empirical conditions which situate thinking, whereas in the latter he fixates on various metaphysical entities that are not actual objects of experience. This division underwrites the broader attempt by such theorists to distinguish their own empirical account of the basis for normative critique as "post-metaphysical," by contrast to more traditional metaphysical appeals to intelligible ideas.

I shall argue that this interpretive consensus fundamentally distorts the continuity underlying Horkheimer's development, as well as misunderstanding the central focus of his mature work. Horkheimer is consistently concerned throughout his work with the importance of empirical study and the relationship of historical and empirical conditions

¹⁸ For a description of this identification in Habermas' work, note Seyla Benhabib et. al., "Max Horkheimer: Between Philosophy and Social Science," in *On Max Horkheimer*, 12.

to concepts. Rather than abandoning this concern in his mature work, it is the implicit dichotomy supposed by the notion of the “post-metaphysical,” the idea that concepts like God may be sharply *contrasted* with concepts arising from empirical observation, which Horkheimer wishes to question. Far from a departure, Horkheimer’s late reflections on the meaning of “intelligible” concepts are thus intimately related to his continuing concern with practices of empirical inquiry.

This contention is defended in three related sections. In the first, I interpret Horkheimer’s *oeuvre* in terms of his pervasive interest in developing a materialist account of thought (or a materialist “logic”). I begin by outlining his early understanding of thought as a form of inquiry for embodied social subjects, before noting how, in his later theorizing, how this account serves as a basis for a presentation of the relationship between various kinds of inquiry and the practice of social critique (chapters 1-2). Far from departing from empirical analysis for a form of philosophical speculation, I shall thus argue that both his early and mature work may be fruitfully read as attempts to develop an account of the relationship between empirical inquiry and cognitive reflection. In the second, I build on this contention, demonstrating that Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason is best understood as congruent with his materialist logic, not as a speculative departure from a concern with empirical inquiry. First, I examine Horkheimer’s empirical analysis of how historical changes in the basic institutions defining political economy in late modern life affect the reasoning habits of individual agents (chapter 3). Then I turn to his diagnosis of the way such changes bring about a form of alienation that is pervasive in modern life (chapter 4). In the final section, I present Horkheimer’s turn to theological concepts as a therapeutic response to the alienation arising from these changes. I begin by examining his understanding of the empirical content of theological concepts as well as his understanding of how such

concepts may be preserved in a form appropriate to modern life (chapter 5), and conclude by examining his own study and retrieval of the significance of the Jewish liturgy (chapter 6).

Horkheimer's mature attempt to question the distinction between concepts which are the products of "empirical" experience and those which are products of "pure" reason or the imagination, the distinction which underlies the notion of later theorists that their conceptualization of normative grounds is *post*-metaphysical in a way Horkheimer's mature theory is not, is an element of his thought which repays examination at the present time. Habermas has recently attempted to articulate an account of the relationship between public reasoning and religion which reflects his claim that the West is a "post-secular" society. As they respond to this attempt to describe the public role of religion in society, theologians and critical theorists would do well to attend to Horkheimer's own account of the relation between theological concepts and public reasoning. I will return to describe how Horkheimer's work may inform the nascent dialogue between Habermas and theology in the conclusion.

Chapter 1

Affect and embodiment in thought: Horkheimer's early reflections on a materialist logic

In this chapter, I shall present Horkheimer's materialist understanding of thought as a practice of inquiry. I will first situate his reflections on empirical inquiry in relation to his understanding of the justification of social critique (1), before developing his account of the relation of affect to the preconditions and object of inquiry (2). Finally, I will note how he employs this understanding of thought as a pattern of inquiry to repair forms of reflection which elide the relation between thinking and affect (3). This will illustrate that the early justification of Horkheimer's theorizing is not inextricably tied to his understanding of a Marxist philosophy of history, as is often supposed. It will also offer a rejoinder to the commonly-held assumption that he increasingly abandoned empirical inquiry and embraced philosophical speculation in essays after "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1937).

1. Horkheimer's conception of thought as a practice of inquiry

It is often supposed that Horkheimer privileges Marx's philosophy of history in order to provide a theoretical standpoint for his critique in the wake of the empirical dissolution of the proletariat.¹⁹ The consequent construal of humans as *homo laborans* by Horkheimer and his easy equation of the emancipation of "productive forces" with human emancipation misunderstands, according to second-generation theorists, both the fact that coordinated social action is a precondition for emancipation (humans are intersubjective agents, not simply producers), as well as the socially mediated basis for

¹⁹ For instance, Axel Honneth, "Max Horkheimer and the Sociological Deficit of Critical Theory," trans. Kenneth Baynes, in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, eds. Seyla Benhabib et. al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 191, notes, "It is [Marx's] interpretation of the contradiction between productive forces and productive relations that ... governs Horkheimer's attempt to provide a foundation for a critical theory of society."

any norms governing an emancipated society (norms are not simply implicit in maximally efficient production but are determined through communication).²⁰

Yet I shall illustrate that, for Horkheimer, particular concerns motivate and direct the use of concepts by a theorist in relation to already-existing contexts of empirical inquiry. The concepts in a philosophy of history thus do not provide, for him a self-contained rational standard by which practices in every historical form of life may be judged (such as “practices inhibiting production are necessarily irrational for humans *qua homo laborans*”). Rather, underlying his appropriation of Marxism as a philosophy of history is a more basic conception of the relationship of empirical inquiry to the justified use of theoretical concepts.

Two distinct lines of textual argument illustrate this. I will summarize them and then develop them in turn.

First, Horkheimer is explicit that a Marxist philosophy of history is a falsifiable theory motivating inquiry. Interpreters have sometimes noted that a kind of fallibilism is implicit in his concern for historically sensitive empirical research.²¹ Yet this empirical sensitivity is typically presented as a “supplemental” second-order commitment in relation to the “primacy” of his philosophy of history.²² This may well describe the way Horkheimer relates the more stable elements of theory to its nuclear components. For instance, he readily admits that “changes” in the empirical object of his study “do not

²⁰ Ibid., 209, “Horkheimer can no more entertain a concept of cultural action that designates the cooperative activity of producing and securing group specific action orientations than he can the epistemological concept of critical activity, since both are conceptually ruled out by referring all human action to labor.” Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 156-157.

²¹ For instance: Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 28-29 and John Duane Abromeit, “The Dialectic of Bourgeois Society: An Intellectual Biography of the Young Max Horkheimer, 1895-1937” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2004), 8, 22, 172-173, 302-304, 352-353, 456.

²² Abromeit, “Dialectic of Bourgeois Society,” 295, thus summarizes the principles informing Horkheimer’s theorizing as “the primacy of a Marxist theory of history and society, supplemented by empirical social research and a critical appropriation of psychoanalysis.”

mean a shift to a wholly new outlook, as long as the age itself does not radically change” but rather require “a reassignment of degrees of relative importance to individual elements of the theory.”²³ Yet however true the distinction between a core and a periphery *within* Horkheimer’s theory may be, such distinctions do not translate as readily as interpreters have assumed into Horkheimer’s account of the way the justification of a theory relates *to empirical inquiry*. As I shall demonstrate, the idea that a “philosophy of history” is a first-order commitment justifying Horkheimer’s social critique fundamentally mistakes the way he relates his theorizing to empirical inquiry.

Second, when justifying his critical theory, Horkheimer draws on his own materialist account of thought as practice of inquiry. Interpreters have recognized Horkheimer’s interest in a materialist understanding of truth, noting, for instance, that Horkheimer attempts to “deontologize and detranscendentalize the notion of truth” in essays such as “On the Problem of Truth” (1935).²⁴ Yet this commitment is not typically understood as fundamental to his own attempts to formulate the justification of his theory. For instance, McCarthy notes that while Horkheimer at times appears to model a pragmatic understanding of the basis of theory by rooting it in the practical interest to end suffering and promote happiness, “too often [he] formulates that interest in terms of the holistic representations with which the Marxist tradition abounds.”²⁵ Ultimately, concludes McCarthy, even his “pragmatic” presentations of this interest run aground on a covert metaphysical supposition, for he takes the desire to end suffering to be a universal moral intuition existing as an “independent variable prior to and unaffected by

²³ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et. al. (New York: Continuum, 1999), 234.

²⁴ Thomas McCarthy, “On the Idea of a Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory*, by David Cousins Hoy and Thomas McCarthy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 10.

²⁵ Ibid., 17. Cf. McCarthy, “The Idea of a Critical Theory and its Relation to Philosophy,” in *On Max Horkheimer*, 132-133, 138-139.

social relations.”²⁶ Both his holistic representations and his appeal to practical interests, McCarthy concludes, reflect his “tendency ... to equate rational justification with ultimate grounding of some sort.”²⁷

Yet surely it is not inconsequential that Horkheimer relates the substantive arguments presented in “Traditional and Critical Theory” – including both his appeals to a Marxist philosophy of history and claims regarding his interest in ending suffering – to “the *logical* structure of the critique of political economy” which he outlines in his reflections on justification in “On the Problem of Truth.”²⁸ He thus portrays his logic as lying at the heart of his own understanding of the method he employs to justify his theorizing. I shall illustrate in this chapter the way Horkheimer’s appropriation of the categories of Marxist political economy and his appeal to affective interests are both intimately related to the account of inquiry which he outlines in “On the Problem of Truth.”

1.1. The function of Marx’s philosophy of history in Horkheimer’s early theorizing

In the early essay “History and Psychology” (1932), Horkheimer’s Marxist proclivities come to the fore as he articulates the contradiction between the forces and relations of production as the key concept defining “the economic conception of history,” which he unreservedly advocates.²⁹ However, after asserting that “the economic conception of history completes the shift from metaphysics to scientific theory,” Horkheimer notes the following caveat,

This conception of history can be transformed into a closed, dogmatic metaphysics if concrete investigations of the contradiction between growing human capacities and the social structure—which reveals itself in this connection as the motor of history—are replaced by a universal interpretive scheme, or if that contradiction is

²⁶ Ibid., 26. Cf. “The Idea of a Critical Theory,” 146-147.

²⁷ Ibid., 27.

²⁸ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 225, fn. 19, emphasis mine.

²⁹ Horkheimer, “History and Psychology,” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, trans. G. Frederick Hunter et. al. (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995), 117-118.

inflated into a force that shapes the future as a matter of necessity. If, however, this conception of history is understood as the correct theory of the known historical process, though still subordinate to the epistemological problem of theory as such, it constitutes a formulation of historical experience consistent with contemporary knowledge.³⁰

It is recognized that Horkheimer in the 30s resists treating Marxism in a deterministic manner by critiquing the idea that its predictions follow a “necessity” divorced from the revolutionary practice of subjects.³¹ However, in this passage he notes two further cautions about how Marxism as a theory may be misunderstood. First, empirical studies must be allowed to throw the interpretative theory motivating the studies into question; thus, “concrete investigations” motivated by the economic “conception of history” cannot be replaced by a “universal interpretive scheme.” Second, the object of theory is not immutable; thus, one cannot rule out in advance that the diagnostic capacity of the theory may become obsolete as its object, in this case “economic crises,” changes.³² This is enough to illustrate that Horkheimer understands the Marxist philosophy of history as a falsifiable theory whose justification is contingent upon its deployment in particular contexts of inquiry.

However, he adds to this the enigmatic assertion that a philosophy of history should be “subordinate to the epistemological problem of theory as such.” He elaborates this important caveat at some length,

It is above all in this sense that the concepts of the economic theory of history distinguish themselves from the metaphysical: they attempt to mirror the historical dynamic in its most definite form, but offer no view of the totality. To the contrary, they contain points of departure for further investigations, the results of which affect the theory itself.

...The theoretical claim that the historical action of human beings and human groups is determined by the economic process can only be validated in detail by way of the scientific elucidation of the modes of response characteristic of a definite historical stage of development. It remains unknown precisely how structural economic changes that affect the psychic constitution prevailing among members of

³⁰ Ibid., 118.

³¹ For instance, note: Abromeit, “Dialectic of Bourgeois Society,” 459-464.

³² Horkheimer will later make precisely this claim, note chapter 3, section 1.

different social groups in a given period transform their overall life expressions [*Lebensäußerungen*]. Thus the claim that the latter depends on the former contains dogmatic elements that seriously undermine its hypothetical value for explaining the present. The disclosure of psychical mediations between economic and cultural development certainly allows us to maintain that radical economic changes precipitate radical cultural changes. Yet it may lead not merely to a critique of the conception of the functional relations between the two, but indeed to a strengthening of the suspicion that the sequence may be changed or reversed in the future. In that case, the priority of economics and psychology with respect to history would have to change. Moreover, it then becomes clear that the conception of history under discussion here considers the hierarchy of the sciences and thus also its own theses—as well as the drives of human beings themselves—as falling within its purview.³³

For Horkheimer, Marxist categories do not provide a self-contained foundation (a “view of the totality”), but rather allow a point of departure that is, in turn, testable in terms of concrete empirical investigations. The results of such inquiry may react back upon existing formulations and “affect the theory itself.” As an example, he notes the Institute’s own concern for social psychology as a discipline that is useful for explaining the failure of proletarian class consciousness. To dogmatically maintain, Horkheimer notes, that cultural changes are determined solely by economic conditions makes impossible any attempt to empirically trace the present failure of class consciousness to emerge in the face of repeated economic crises, thus dogmatically sealing off “the economic theory of history” from any kind of testing or modification. He then reasons from the hypothetical possibility that the decisiveness of elements of culture may supersede the economy as a motor of history to an epistemological rule: the taken for granted “hierarchy of the sciences” itself, as well as the theory motivating inquiry must be open to alteration on the basis of the empirical study of the object of theory. From his earliest writings Horkheimer thus articulates the falsifiability not merely of peripheral elements of an otherwise stable philosophy of history, but of the philosophy of history itself, and does so in terms set by an understanding of empirical inquiry.

³³ Horkheimer, “History and Psychology,” 119-120.

1.2. Horkheimer on justification: the relation of truth-claims to contexts of inquiry

By noting that the Marxist philosophy of history is “still subordinate to the epistemological problem of theory as such,” Horkheimer references, however obliquely, the relationship between empirical contexts of inquiry and theoretical concepts. Yet he does not reflect at length on this relationship until “On the Problem of Truth” (1935). He begins the essay by presenting two opposing ways of relating normativity and historicity, before noting that both share a faulty premise,

Is there really only the choice between acceptance of a final truth, as proclaimed in religious and idealistic schools of philosophy, and the view that every thesis and every theory is always merely ‘subjective,’ i.e., true and valid for a person or a group or a time or human beings as a species, but lacking objective validity?³⁴

On the one hand, there is a view of truth that relies on the practice of the specialized sciences as its model; consequently, it construes all validity claims as relative due to the viscidities of historical experience. On the other hand, there are various forms of metaphysics, which claim that their vantage point on the whole allows the subject to judge the meaning underlying the flux of discrete experiences.³⁵ Despite their differences, both kinds of thought share in common the notion that historicity and normativity are mutually exclusive.

Horkheimer notes that this commonality arises from a misunderstanding of concepts the two share in common. Each portrays concepts as *reflections* of objects in the world. But concepts are better understood, notes Horkheimer, as *actions* for embodied subjects. If concepts are recognized as activities which respond to existing affective states and social relations, then judging the truth of such concepts has to do with more than whether they reflect reality. Rather, the truth of concepts consists in

³⁴ Horkheimer, “On the Problem of Truth,” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 183.

³⁵ For Horkheimer’s description of the two types of thought, see “Problem of Truth,” 181-183.

whether they allow subjects to rearrange their already existing relationships with reality in such a way that their affective desires and interests are better satisfied,

To conceptualize a defect is ... not to transcend it; concepts and theories constitute one moment of its rectification, a prerequisite to the proper procedure, which as it progresses is constantly redefined, adapted, and improved.

An isolated and conclusive theory of reality is completely unthinkable. If one takes seriously the formal definition of truth which runs through the whole history of logic as the correspondence of cognition with its object, there follows from it the contradiction to the dogmatic interpretation of thought. This correspondence is neither a simple datum, an immediate fact as it appears in the doctrine of intuitive immediate certainty and in mysticism, nor does it take place in the pure sphere of spiritual immanence, as it seems to in Hegel's metaphysical legend. Rather it is always established by real events and human activities. Already in the investigation and determination of facts and even more in the verification of theories, a role is played by the direction of attention, the refinement of methods, the categorical structure of the subject matter—in short, by human activity corresponding to the given social period.³⁶

Concepts are thus understood by Horkheimer as moments of human activity that intend to reflexively delimit and then address an irritation or accomplish a desire.

Understanding concepts as a form of activity enables one to recognize that the “correspondence” between concept and object is always qualified by a socio-historical context, as well as by the particular projects of historically situated agents. Thus correspondence cannot simply be a matter of the reflection of objects.

Horkheimer's contention is thus that only when one abstracts concepts from such qualified contexts of inquiry does the dichotomy between normativity and historicity emerge. If, by way of contrast, thinking itself arises in relation to contingent affective states and is oriented towards historical practices, if, that is, it presupposes an already existing state of affairs that sets its contours and limits, then truth should be understood as similarly qualified, as bearing a relation to this antecedent context. In sum,

³⁶ Ibid., 189-190. This notably resembles John Dewey's account of the relationship between truth and the preconditions of inquiry in *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), 101-119. Cf. Raymond Guess' analysis in *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 22, of the similarity between the idea of “truth” found in early critical theorists and that offered by Pierce and Dewey.

Horkheimer wishes to claim that the concept of truth, may not be abstracted from the historical conditions which situate and delimit the emergence of other concepts: “a static system of propositions about reality, indeed, any relation of concept and object not historically mediated, no longer appears meaningful as an idea.”³⁷ The question of truth is rather, do concepts enable a subject to act regarding objects of concern in a way that satisfies the conditions motivating such activity? Concepts change as their various subjective preconditions change (e.g. human affect, practical purposes and interests), and as the objects they establish relations to change (e.g. existing socio-historical relations), yet this contingency does not mean that concepts cannot be judged as true or false, only that such judgments will always depend upon the preconditions and goals presupposed by particular contexts of inquiry.

In a striking example that applies this understanding of justification to a Marxist philosophy of history, Horkheimer draws an analogy between theory and a medical diagnosis,

If it is true that a person has tuberculosis, this concept may indeed be transformed in the development of medicine or lose its meaning entirely. But whoever makes a contrary diagnosis today with the same concept, not in terms of a higher insight which includes identifying this man's tuberculosis, but simply denying the finding from the same medical standpoint is wrong. ... There are at present various opposed views of society. According to one, the present wretched physical and psychological state of the masses and the critical condition of society as a whole, in the face of the developed state of the productive apparatus and technology, necessarily follow from the continued existence of an obsolete principle of social organization. According to others, the problem is not the principle but interference with it or carrying it too far or a matter of spiritual, religious, or purely biological factors. They are not all true, only that theory is true which can grasp the historical process so deeply that it is possible to develop from it the closest approximation to the structure and tendency of social life in the various spheres of culture. It too is no exception to the rule that it is conditioned like every thought and every intellectual content, but the circumstance that it corresponds to a specific social class and is tied up with the horizon and the interests of certain groups does not in any way change the fact that it is also valid for the others.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid., 193.

³⁸ Ibid., 193-194.

In the case of Horkheimer's example one may, of course, query whether the different social theories he outlines are attempts to resolve the same irritant, and thus assume an analogous context of inquiry. If one grants that premise, however (or appreciates, for the sake of argument, that Horkheimer took this to be the case), then his account of justification is clear. Even if current ways of diagnosing social relations become obsolete due to future changes in their object and even if the irritants they are intended to resolve cease to exist, such contingencies do not negate that, given they suppose a context of inquiry in common, one may distinguish the best diagnosis from inferior ones. Historical contingency and consequent fallibility do not trade-off with normativity.

Influential interpreters have suggested that Horkheimer's emphasis on the practical nature of truth is hopelessly circular,

In the essays of the 1930s purely immanent critique stands in tension with Horkheimer's hopes for social progress. Indeed, to say that there is 'tension' between his theory of truth and his practical theory is a vast understatement. Horkheimer is apt to speak of truth in entirely practical terms as that which promotes the overall rationality of society or as what is politically progressive. But of course determining what is 'more rational' or 'progressive' requires criteria. How one is to go about grounding such claims without an appeal to truth is not obvious and requires additional argument that Horkheimer never provides.³⁹

However, Horkheimer's claim is that "truth" depends upon already existing contexts of inquiry and is thus related to the contingent experience of affective states (for the subject) as well as already existing social practices (the object). Such contexts situate what statements regarding the goal of theory mean (i.e. what it might mean to make society "more rational"), as well as the conditions under which a theory's "truth" may be tested. Horkheimer wishes to question whether the idea of "truth" makes sense apart

³⁹ Fred Rush, "Conceptual Foundations of Early Critical Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 26-27. This echoes an earlier critique offered by Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973), 63 (cf. 83).

from such contexts. Thus while it is true that his critique does not appeal to criteria other than those which would be involved in a “purely immanent critique,” the idea that his critique *fails* because of this assumes the idea of truth he wishes to question.

Similar to his argument in “On the Problem of Truth,” the introduction to “Traditional and Critical Theory” is devoted to a critique of the idea that theory merely establishes “a relation between the simple perception or verification of a fact and the conceptual structure of our knowing.”⁴⁰ While traditional theory is content to treat “knowledge and action as distinct concepts,” and thus to allow a “dualism of thought and being”/“separation of thought and action,”⁴¹ for Horkheimer thought is a way of acting for the subject that always already bears a relation to existing embodied states and social practices.

Horkheimer thus concludes the opening section of “Traditional and Critical Theory” by noting,

The reception, transformation, and rationalization of factual knowledge is the scholar’s special form of spontaneity, namely theoretical activity, whether there is question of as detailed as possible an exposition of a subject as in history and the descriptive branches of other special disciplines, or of the synthesis of masses of data and the attainment of general rules as in physics. The dualism of thought and being, understanding and perception is second nature to the scientist.⁴²

Horkheimer calls this kind of theoretical activity the scholar’s *special form* of spontaneity to indicate that what “traditional” theory often treats as the paradigmatic activity defining thinking is actually only a particular kind of activity among others. Scientific detachment is a legitimate kind of thought activity for subjects. Yet if such detached “insight,” the subsuming of sensory experience in terms of apt descriptive categories, is taken as a model for thinking itself, then the activity of thought is limited to the “determinative, ordering, unifying function” which is wrongly understood as “the sole

⁴⁰ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 193.

⁴¹ Ibid., 230, 231, 242.

⁴² Ibid., 196-197.

foundation for all else” with the result that “towards it all human effort is directed.”⁴³

Detached description may be a useful form of activity in order to accomplish certain historical goals, such as the effective control of natural contingency, but it may also inhibit other thought activities for which such detachment is a liability.

Traditional theory is thus problematic not only because it fails to recognize the conditioned and interested nature of cognition, but also because it has a reductive understanding of the way such concepts relate to the spontaneity of embodied subjects. It is interesting that Horkheimer cites the example of a historian in the above passage, one who clearly recognizes the conditioned nature of thinking, as epitomizing the reduction of thought to one particular form of spontaneity. If one equates Horkheimer’s argument with a recognition of the historically and materially conditioned nature of thought, it becomes evident that a crucial aspect of his interest is missed: he wishes to treat scientific description as one form of spontaneous activity for embodied subjects among others. Further, the passage signals that he is not advancing an abstract critique of the observational processes of the sciences as such, but rather critiquing a mistaken description of what both scientific activity and thought themselves are, which treats detached observation as characteristic of thinking instead of as one form the activity of thinking may take among others.

Towards the latter half of “Traditional and Critical Theory,” Horkheimer notes that he wishes to discuss “the difference in ... logical structure” between traditional and critical theory, and it is at this point that he refers readers to “On the Problem of Truth.”⁴⁴ Echoing considerations we have just outlined, he notes, “The primary propositions of traditional theory define universal concepts under which all facts in the

⁴³ Ibid., 198.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 224.

field in question are to be subsumed.”⁴⁵ Instead of exclusively engaging in critique, however, he highlights similarities between traditional and critical theory, “The critical theory of society also begins with abstract determinations; in dealing with the present era it begins with the characterization of an economy based on exchange.”⁴⁶ Another parallel, he notes, is that, “In both types of theory there is a strict deduction if the claim of validity for general definitions is shown to include a claim that certain factual relations will occur.”⁴⁷ Thus for instance, critical theory postulates that “existent capitalist society ... derives from the basic relation of exchange”⁴⁸ as well as that “an exchange economy must necessarily lead to a heightening of ... social tensions.”⁴⁹ This kind of a predictive claim regarding factual relations can, Horkheimer thinks, be verified. Thus critical theory and traditional theory alike use concepts intended to reflect the present state of social relations and deduce future states of affairs.

These parallels, however, are a foil against which a more basic differentiation can be made. Horkheimer continues, “The relation of the primary conceptual interconnections to the world of facts is not essentially a relation of classes to instances.”⁵⁰ Though it includes descriptive concepts and predictions, critical theory does not simply reduce the relationship between concepts and objects to the detached subsumption of instances under classes and the prediction of future states. It involves a third kind of judgment besides the descriptive and predictive. Horkheimer thus continues, “The critical theory of society is, in its totality, the unfolding of a single existential judgment,” and he implies that it is the self-awareness of this existential judgment, a judgment regarding society

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 225.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 226.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 226.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 225.

that determines the significance of descriptive and predictive judgments for the theorist, which sets critical theory apart from traditional theory.⁵¹

The idea that critical theory is, at its most basic, an “existential judgment” has caused significant confusion. Many have taken Horkheimer to be advocating a commitment to Marxism based primarily on an otherwise ungrounded ethical intuition.⁵² Yet Horkheimer is using the term “existential” to denote, not a subjective “value” commitment per se, but rather a type of *judgment* for a subject. In a note intended to explain what is meant by “existential,” he clarifies,

There are connections between the forms of judgment and the historical periods. A brief indication will show what is meant. The classificatory judgment is typical of prebourgeois society: this is the way it is, and man can do nothing about it. The hypothetical and disjunctive forms belong especially to the bourgeois world: under certain circumstances this effect can take place; it is either thus or so. Critical theory maintains: it need not be so; man can change reality, and the necessary conditions for such a change already exist.⁵³

The first two forms of judgment are subsumptive, insofar as they each exemplify “a relation of classes to instances,” although they differ in the way they understand how instances are subsumed. In the first case, instances are judged as reflective of a static subject-independent reality (Horkheimer asserts this to be the form of judgment characterizing pre-modern ontology). In the second, instances are judged after being subjected to the scientific method, so that predictive “laws of nature” are inferred from controlled observation (Horkheimer takes this to be a form of judgment characterizing the new sciences). Both of these have in common that they do not understand judgment as a way of changing relations between the subject and the object. Concepts

⁵¹ Ibid., 227.

⁵² For instance: Hauke Brunkhorst, “Dialectical Positivism of Happiness: Horkheimer's Materialist Deconstruction of Philosophy,” trans. John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer*, 84; Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 51, 186, 348; Dick Howard, *The Marxian Legacy* (New York: Urizen Books, 1977) 103-104. Martin Jay discusses the opacity of the phrase in “Max Horkheimer and the Retreat from Hegelian Marxism,” in *Marxism and Totality: the Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 209-210.

⁵³ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 227, fn. 20.

are rather understood as mirrors, either of metaphysical truths regarding the whole or invariable laws of nature. Critical theory, by contrast, understands judgment as a form of activity which intends to “change reality.”

This interpretation of an “existential judgment” commends itself insofar as it presents such judgment in a way congruous with Horkheimer’s understanding of concepts as forms of activity in “On the Problem of Truth” as well as at the outset of “Traditional and Critical Theory.” Yet it raises a further ambiguity, for Horkheimer has already noted that classificatory and hypothetical judgments are *also* forms of activity, insofar as they are social practices for subjects. Why does he distinguish the “existential” from these types of judgment, instead of, for instance, noting the two as variations of it? The reference to history provides the answer: Horkheimer is not merely contrasting different kinds of judgment but also noting the way various forms of judgment are characteristic of particular historical moments. Just as “bourgeois” hypothetical judgments incorporate what was once understood as the primary model for cognition (the contemplation of the object in the medieval form of life), so critical theory understands the classificatory and hypothetical forms of judgment in terms of its model, cognition *qua* activity.

Although Horkheimer draws on Hegel and Marx to describe the way concept use develops in relation to historical practices, he wants to clarify that the way critical theory envisions categories is also distinct from these models: though concepts have a genetic relation to historical social practices, their development is not determined by historical stages in a progressive or unilinear fashion (either through the self-realization of *Geist*, or the rising self-consciousness of the proletariat),

The conceptual development is, if not parallel at least in verifiable relation to the historical development. But the essential relationship of theory to time does not reside in the correspondence between individual parts of the conceptual

construction and successive periods of history; that is a view on which Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* and Marx's *Capital*, examples of the same method, are in agreement. It consists rather in the continual alteration of the theoretician's existential judgment on society, for this judgment is conditioned by the conscious relation to the historical practice of society.⁵⁴

Concepts as forms of practical activity develop, notes Horkheimer, as they are appropriated by the subject self-consciously in relation to socio-historical practices, which the subject intends to alter. He thus attempts to understand the evolution of conceptual judgment in relation to the activity of subjects in a way that differentiates his own thinking from metaphysical forms of thought that suggest a rational idea underlying the movement of history.

Horkheimer repeatedly argues in various polemical contexts that thought becomes distorted when it is abstracted from either the affective states or the social and historical conditions that form contexts of inquiry for subjects. In order to demonstrate this, we will first examine Horkheimer's positive account of the way affective embodiment and empirical experience relate to thought. Then we will develop his critique of the abstraction of thought from either of these preconditions: affective embodiment (exemplified by neo-Kantianism and positivism), or empirical experience (exemplified by *Lebensphilosophie*). This will illustrate that Horkheimer draws upon an understanding of thought as a form of inquiry not simply when seeking to justify his own use of Marxist categories but also in attempts to differentiate his own theorizing from its primary competitors.

2. Affect and Thought

2.1. Affect as a precondition of thought

In an early aphorism on Leibniz's *Monadology*, Horkheimer notes that affective states – worry, joy, anxiety, yearning, and particularly suffering – color and shape every sensual

⁵⁴ Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," 233-234.

experience a subject has of its environment. In so doing, he expresses a leitmotif of his theorizing: the concepts of theory are always shaped by certain embodied conditions anterior to, yet motivating, reflexive cognition, which we may term preconditions of thought,

A philosopher once compared the soul to a windowless house. Men relate to each other, talk to each other, deal with each other, persecute each other, yet they do not see each other. But because people have ideas about each other, the philosopher explained them by saying that God had placed images of the others in the soul of each individual. ... It is not my impression that man's knowledge of others comes from God. Instead, I would say that those houses do have windows but that they let in only a small and distorted segment of events in the outside world.

But this distorting effect is not so much a consequence of the peculiarities of the sense organs as of the worried or joyful, anxious or aggressive, slavish or superior, sated or yearning, dull or alert psychic attitudes which constitute that ground of our life against which all other experiences stand out, and which gives them their specific quality. ...

I know of only one kind of gust that can open the windows of the house wider: shared suffering.⁵⁵

Horkheimer characterizes the affective preconditions which shape experience as a "ground of life" that serves as the background against which particular experiences "stand out," by which he means that particular experiences become distinct for an embodied subject in relation to already existing affective states that color its orientation towards the whole. Horkheimer thus likens affective states to "windows" which shape and form the way intuitions of the outside are received by a subject. Embodied affects are thus preconditions for explaining the subject's way of relating the concrete particulars of its experience. Affect gives such experiences "their specific quality."

Horkheimer draws on a particular kind of vocabulary and we do well to remember his philosophical training in German idealism: to speak of a "ground of life" against which specific qualities of experience stand out is to gesture towards that enigmatic intuitive experience of the manifold which is itself presupposed by the synthesizing

⁵⁵ Horkheimer, "Monadology" (1926-1931), in *Dawn and Decline: Notes, 1926-1931 & 1950-1969*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 17-18.

determinations of the understanding. Affective states are the subject's self-awareness of its own embodiment as a part of the manifold. Put otherwise, the subject experiences affect as a sign that it stands in continuity with and is dependent upon its environment. Joy, desire, longing, and fear are thus intuitive ways that fragility and (dis)continuity with one's context are first felt by subjects. Subsequent distinctions and determinations presume, respond to, and are shaped by this continuing affective experience of relational unity. The form thought takes is not merely inconceivable without an account of the forms of intuition or the determinations of the understanding (Kant), it is equally inconceivable, maintains Horkheimer, without an account of its affective preconditions. If the former signify the subject's self-awareness that it is distinct from objects of its cognition, the latter signify its continuing recognition that it stands in relation to such objects.

Despite utilizing ideas informing *Lebensphilosophie*, Horkheimer is not claiming that such affective states are related to ready-made norms for subjects, nor is he setting them over against the determinations of the understanding (as if the latter corrupts the former).⁵⁶ Rather, he notes that affective states are meaningful because of the way they situate and direct the cognitive mediation of the understanding. There is thus a refusal to separate affect and cognition as if either the former provided access to some intuitive "reality" beneath the empirical conditions determined by the faculty of the understanding, or as if the latter could be understood as detached from the desires of an embodied subject.

Horkheimer, further, refuses to equate affect as the unified experience of some *Volk*; in this early aphorism, he recognizes the unique particularity of the many ways particular subjects experience the whole – some with anxiety, some with joy, yearning,

⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of Horkheimer's relation to *Lebensphilosophie*, note section 3.2. below.

fear, etc. As Horkheimer will put it elsewhere, reflecting the convergence of his materialism with Schopenhauerian nominalism, “Only human beings themselves—not the ‘essence’ of humanity, but the real human beings of a definite historical moment, dependent upon each other and upon outer and inner nature – are the acting and suffering subjects of history.”⁵⁷

Cognitive determination thus arises in relation to embodiment and exists in a symbiotic relationship with it, which can be altered by the disruption of affective states. “Shared suffering” notes Horkheimer, is the most fundamental reason why a subject’s existing knowledge of the world is altered. Thought as an activity of inquiry is thus intimately related to alterations of embodied states. In a contemporaneous aphorism, Horkheimer develops this claim, noting that the idea, “there is such a thing as pure disinterested striving for truth,” can be tested by the following “thought experiment,”

One should abstract from one’s love for others, one’s thirst for recognition up to and including its most sublime manifestations, one should radically destroy in thought the possibility of any and every kind of desire and thus of any pain or joy, one should imagine a total lack of interest in the fate of society and all its members so that not only no love or hatred, fear or vanity, but not even the tiniest spark of compassion, let alone solidarity, remain. One should, in other words, play the role of the dead that appears as a ghost (although with the difference that one is not only impotent like a ghost but also without any tie to past or present so that one would not even have reason to haunt anyone or anything).

The result of the thought experiment, he concludes, is that “one will discover that ... there sets in a disquieting indifference to any sort of knowledge whatever. The world looks as the female body does to the old man whose drives are dead.” To conceive of knowing without suffering, desire or, at the least, attachment to existing relationships is to reify cognition into something other than an activity for an embodied historical being. This abstraction, Horkheimer concludes, “is a philosophical delusion.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Horkheimer, “A New Concept of Ideology” (1930), in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 139.

⁵⁸ Horkheimer, “The Disinterested Striving for Truth” (1926-1931), in *Dawn and Decline*, 53.

In his first major work, “Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History” (1930), Horkheimer develops his understanding of the relation between theory and embodied subjectivity by contrasting the philosophies of history given by Machiavelli and Hobbes with Vico’s *The New Sciences*. Both Machiavelli and Hobbes, he notes, claim that one may infer invariable social laws from human history by discerning a constant human “nature” manifest in the apparent viscidities of various epochs. This is used by both to legitimize the power of the state as a solution which best fits needs arising for humans so construed.

Horkheimer appreciates these thinkers for relating material need to the development of cultural life,

Culture’s advance, and indeed its very emergence, both have material causes ... all life conditions relating to work in the end are not based upon an ideal origin, but rather are driven by material need. Even morality ... is derived from social conditions that are themselves determined by need.⁵⁹

Yet while both take themselves to be deducing a-historical descriptions of human nature, they are actually describing the way material need disturbs and informs the social practices of their particular form of life. The inference from a particular historical mediation to a universal constant (human nature) pays no attention to the way social and historical contexts situate inquiry,

For both of them, any true science, not only mathematics and natural sciences but also the science of mankind, remained distinctly separate and independent from history. ... This metaphysics fancied that it could make the real world—and with it the essence of mankind—accessible without any fundamental historical research to support it.⁶⁰

Machiavelli and Hobbes thus portray their activity on the model of the natural sciences, as a practice of observation and inference which generates knowledge in the form of a-historical universal laws.

⁵⁹ Horkheimer, “Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History,” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 323-324.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 377.

They understand religion, by contrast, as a web of prejudicial superstitions that hinder free inquiry. Following Vico, however, Horkheimer notes that this is a mistake. There may be no “simple juxtaposition of ‘Reason’ and ideology,”⁶¹ he notes, because “the intellectual life of individuals is bound up with the life process of the social body of which they are a part and which determines their activity.”⁶² By way of example, he notes that rather than understanding “medieval religiosity” as an ideology which retards unprejudiced observation, one needs to recognize that “knowledge and ideology remain fairly undifferentiated within this religiosity, which in point of fact is the form of medieval reason—though this is revealed only by an examination of the whole social dynamic.”⁶³ Horkheimer thus recognizes that what is treated by early moderns as prejudice is in fact the shape observation and inference have taken in a past form of life. “Reality is not a solid object, nor is consciousness a blank mirror which, as the Enlightenment would have it, could either be fogged up by the hot air of the ignorant or the malicious or polished by those who possess knowledge.”⁶⁴ Thus to object to tradition as such, as if it were intrinsically opposed to knowledge, is a mistake. For there is no comprehension of the significance of sensation as such unmediated by socially accepted accounts of the whole, which facilitate (or hinder) inquiry in historical forms of life. If it is possible to retrospectively distinguish previous forms of “ideology” from modern reasoning, it will not be because one relies illicitly on a socially mediated account of the whole while the other frees itself from any such account. The critic must, at the least, acknowledge this continuity between the two.

In contrast to Machiavelli and Hobbes, Vico is thus praised by Horkheimer for understanding that knowledge of the human cannot be disentangled from the various

⁶¹ Ibid., 361.

⁶² Ibid., 360.

⁶³ Ibid., 361.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

historical ways the origin and goal of the human has been understood by past forms of life, as if such knowledge disclosed a-historical essences.

Human self-knowledge is only possible when based on an analysis of the historical process in which humans act, and not on the basis of mere introspection as subjective idealism has always held. Economy, state, law, religion, science, art—all these particularly human creations originated in history: not from isolated individuals, but rather from the relationships among these individuals.⁶⁵

For Vico there can thus be no sharp division between a modern science of humanity and pre-modern ideology, for art and religion are forms of socially embedded mediated knowing, “Vico is far from wanting to understand the process of artistic and religious creation as the conscious or even intentional recasting of a given reality that was previously unideological.”⁶⁶ Rather than obscuring or recasting the truth about the human “in-itself,” religion was thus a “necessary and primitive form of knowledge, one that provides modern science with its roots.”⁶⁷ Here then is Horkheimer’s early understanding of how one may distinguish between the “truth” of previous forms of knowledge and the contemporary practice of the sciences. Retrospectively, one may argue that an earlier account of the meaning of the whole is penultimate (“primitive”), insofar as it is unable to facilitate the goals that earlier practices of inquiry set for themselves in a way that is as satisfactory as a later account, due to some inhibiting feature. Horkheimer will have reason to revisit and modify this early understanding, but we will leave aside for the moment this important discussion of its adequacy.

Horkheimer concludes his comparison by noting that while Vico emphasizes the social mediation of knowledge, he does not disconnect such mediation from its concrete

⁶⁵ Ibid., 378.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 385.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 383. Joseph Maier, “Vico and Critical Theory,” *Social Research* 43, no. 4 (Winter 1976), claims that Vico’s method is preferable to Horkheimer’s because the former maintains that “knowledge no less than belief springs from myth and ideology” (845), whereas the latter treats ideology simply as sociologically conditioned false belief (851-853). Yet, the fact that moderns *incorrectly* construe as false what is actually a historical way of knowing is precisely Horkheimer’s argument.

relation to material needs, “Like Machiavelli, only much more logically and deliberately, Vico begins with the premise that human creations are to be explained by the notion of necessity, or, more precisely, by their origin in material conditions.”⁶⁸ While Vico recognizes, in contrast to Machiavelli and Hobbes, that needs are always expressed in ways mediated by the self-understanding of social agents in a form of life (there is no knowledge of “need” as such), he does not ignore that social practices cannot be properly understood if abstracted from the biological and instinctual interests of the embodied subjects who participate in them. Science should thus be understood as arising in relation to both the socio-historical self-understanding and embodied interest of particular subjects. Vico notes that moderns go wrong:

- (1): When they treat reasoning as simply a product of social practices with no connection to embodied needs, or
- (2): When they treat “reality” as something which may be known apart from socially mediated accounts of the whole.

We are now in a position to understand how Horkheimer’s appreciation of Vico relates to his understanding of affect as a precondition of thought. Vico grasps both that reasoning relates to the needs of embodied individuals (its “material” axis, i.e. 1), as well as that reasoning as a social practice is learned in a community with already existing socio-historical practices of explanation (its “social” axis, i.e. 2). Comparing this with Horkheimer’s early notes on affect, we may observe that while the first axis repeats his claim that thinking relates to that which is not “pure” thought (embodiment), the second axis delimits what is meant by “thinking” (it is a learned social practice). Thus, for instance, pre-modern “ideology” and modern science are two forms reasoning may take for embodied subjects as learned social practices in different historical forms of life.

⁶⁸ Horkheimer, “Bourgeois Philosophy of History,” 380.

Horkheimer thus notes at the conclusion of the essay that “language, art, religion, and metaphysics” may not be abstracted from the “natural instinctual social processes” out of which they arise, and treated as simply a “voluntary and conscious act of human reason.”⁶⁹ Reasoning arises in relation both to “natural instinctual” needs (i.e. the “material” axis), as well as to already existing “social processes” (i.e. the “social” axis). Put succinctly, such practices are forms of activity for embodied social subjects.

In relating embodiment and sociality, Horkheimer does not separate them or privilege one as more basic than another, but notes that both are properly basic, mutually related conditions of thinking. Humans thus have a two-fold pre-existing relationship to their environment, *as* embodied and *as* social. Thought does not precede the relationship, but arises when it becomes an object of self-conscious cognitive reflection for a subject. The affective experience of subjects arises in relation to this intersection between embodiment and sociality and is the initial symptom which motivates this self-conscious reflection. Affect, we may say, registers an experience of destabilization in the metabolism that exists between a subject’s embodied needs and its social habits. It thus invites cognitive reflection. Yet affect also constrains such reflection, and we will now examine Horkheimer’s understanding of the way this occurs in his early essay “Materialism and Metaphysics” (1933).

2.2. Affect and the tasks of thought

If reasoning is understood in a way unrelated to embodiment, then it may be possible to conceptualize the whole, referred to by Horkheimer as “unconditioned reality.”⁷⁰ Indeed, the conceptualization of the unconditioned, he notes, is the central task of the metaphysician. There are numerous ways of making the unconditioned

⁶⁹ Ibid., 385.

⁷⁰ Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” in *Critical Theory*, 18.

intelligible through conceptualization.⁷¹ In each case, however, the concept of the unconditioned provides the theorist with a vantage point for understanding the meaning of the whole, from which they can infer the value of given acts insofar as they reflect an “adaptation of empirical human life to that intelligible ground ... which philosophy succeeds in grasping.”⁷² He concludes,

Ultimate reality is regarded as normative ... not only in those systems where the religious origins of the dependence relationship still show in the form which the precept takes, but also in all cases where harmony between the individual’s existence and its ground as discovered by metaphysics is regarded as valuable.⁷³

Metaphysicians thus comprehend the unconditioned as an object which may be conceptually expressed, and use such conceptualization as basis for guiding practical action.

If, however, reasoning assumes and responds to already existing embodied states and social habits, then attempts to justify or change social practices need not begin with reflection on the unconditioned. Such reflection is not ruled out of court a-priori. However, it is only useful to the materialist insofar as it relates to the subject’s attempt to resolve an affective state arising in relation to social practices it has taken in hand. Thus, while “metaphysics usually has its gaze fixed on ‘the structural unity of this one, great, unknown reality to whose questions we have no answer’ ... for the materialist such a unity is habitually neither starting point nor goal.”⁷⁴ It is not the case, clarifies Horkheimer, that materialism in its various manifestations does not have hypotheses about questions such as the nature of reality. Yet such hypotheses only become conscious objects of reflection for the materialist as they relate to concrete irritants in already existing practices for subjects. They may stand in the background of inquiry;

⁷¹ Horkheimer thus notes a theologian, an idealist, and a modern adherent to existentialist phenomenology as examples (ibid., 18-19).

⁷² Ibid., 18.

⁷³ Ibid., 18-19.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 21.

however, they are not typically the primary object of its focus. For the materialist wishes to describe, not how contingent practices correlate to the unconditioned, but rather why they cause dissatisfaction for the ephemeral subjects who inhabit them,

For the materialist, judgments which embrace all reality are always questionable and not very important, because far removed from the type of activity that generated them. ... The materialist regards an error as the more pardonable the further removed it is from the particular circumstances which are of practical importance for him in a given situation; his opponents, on the contrary, are usually the more concerned, the more the error touches on principle. Principle, as we said, can be of very great importance for the materialist too, but the reason for this is not to be found in the nature of the principle as such. The importance arises not from the theory alone but from the tasks which at any given period are to be mastered with the help of the theory.⁷⁵

Precisely because materialism is a descriptive and diagnostic practice intended to highlight and then fix existing patterns of living, Horkheimer views it, first, as pursuing a different kind of question than metaphysics, “Any treatment of materialism is misguided ... which is interested primarily in metaphysical questions.”⁷⁶

For the materialist, the question of first importance is practical, e.g., “why are subjects in a form of life dissatisfied when they participate in this social practice”? Thus, “The materialist tries to replace the justification of an action with an explanation of it through an historical understanding of the agent. He regards the justification as an illusion.”⁷⁷ Horkheimer does not mean to suggest by this rhetorical flourish that *no* justification may be offered for an action. Thus he later clarifies, “Justifications may indeed be quite appropriate in a particular society for particular actions, but only to a particular authority and not because of some unconditional order of things.”⁷⁸ What he wishes to deny, rather, is that one must appeal to a correspondence between a practice

⁷⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 21 (cf. 14).

⁷⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 44-45.

and an intelligible order in order to measure the normativity of the practice, as if the alienation of subjects were an insufficiently basic reason for practical action.

Yet Horkheimer has already admitted that the materialist could become interested in investigating notions of the intelligible whole, *if* such notions are related to a practical context of inquiry. This raises an interesting question: what if the affective relation of subjects to their practices is disrupted due to changes in the prevalent conceptions of the intelligible informing their practical life? In such a case, the practical problem under inquiry might require the theorist to revisit conceptualizations of the intelligible. The materialist would not then be concerned to appeal to the intelligible to justify action, but would rather investigate the practical relationship between existing intelligible explanations and the social practices and affective states which they enable. We shall return to this question in examining Horkheimer's mature work.

In sum, the starting point of the materialist is failed social practices which have led to discontent in the agents who inhabit them, and the goal of the materialist is "the alteration of those conditions which cause unhappiness."⁷⁹ What counts as an explanation for the present suffering causing "unhappiness" as well as its successful "alteration" may only be defined hypothetically ahead of an inquiry into the conditions of dissatisfaction, and will differ historically depending on which subjects and practices are under consideration. Thus, Horkheimer explains that "this goal took on a different shape in varying historical situations," for "the practical requirements of concrete problems affect, in turn both the content and the form of materialist theory."⁸⁰ Having noted an outline of Horkheimer's early materialist logic, focusing in particular on how embodied affect serves as a precondition and constraint for inquiry, I will now investigate how he employs this understanding in his contemporary context.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

3. The repair of distorted forms of thought

In a claim which has become ubiquitous in the interpretive literature, Dubiel notes, “In its earliest years the Frankfurt Circle defined the relation between philosophy and science as one of programmatic indifference.”⁸¹ By “indifference” he means that philosophical reflection did not alter the autonomous practice of scientific inquiry, but merely “integrated” its independent findings.⁸² In a discussion of Horkheimer’s early research program, Dubiel specifies that philosophy integrates by organizing the questions scientific inquiry will pursue around a theme, “The decisive role of presentation – as here performed by the philosopher – is to treat concepts and hypotheses of organizationally and cognitively distinct disciplines in such a way that they can be related to each other with respect to a central theme.” An example of such a theme might be “the anthropological conception of man as an unchanging being.” A particular science then “transforms” the theme into a set of research questions, which it pursues using the observational methods appropriate to it.⁸³

In later reflection, by contrast, Dubiel notes that Horkheimer comes to understand “Marx’s economic critique as the orienting, paradigmatic unity of philosophy and the specialized sciences.”⁸⁴ Philosophy no longer directs scientific inquiry to “themes” which it may have otherwise ignored, and then lets the scientist loose to use her methods with impunity. It now explicitly critiques the detached practice of the sciences as reflective of a reified society. The social scientist is subjected to critique insofar as she views her object as a detached spectator instead of a participant that may constitute it. In an influential development of Dubiel’s work, Seyla Benhabib thus notes,

⁸¹ Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 63.

⁸² Dubiel thus calls philosophy “the integrating medium of interdisciplinary theory” (ibid., 95).

⁸³ Ibid., 152.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 95. For a detailed explanation of this formulation, note *Theory and Politics*, 64.

Horkheimer moves from an ‘externalist’ to an ‘internalist’ critique of science and theory: the primary object of his attack is not the uses to which science and theory are put in society, but the manner in which the concepts, constructions, and scientific operations of traditional theories reproduce a distorted image of the social reality. The question can no longer be a unification of philosophy and science, nor a mere utilization by critical theory of the results of the specialized sciences. Philosophy asserts its right against the sciences in its capacity as ‘critique.’⁸⁵

Horkheimer’s method, according to Benhabib, changes qualitatively: he subjects the practices of the sciences themselves to critique. Consequently, his theory increasingly relies upon speculative philosophical concepts divorced from empirical content.

By contrast, I wish to demonstrate that Horkheimer is interested in critiquing the reification of the object by the sciences from the outset of his work. That is, he does not begin with a view that accepts the sharp division between subject and object, observation and participation, as constitutive of the scientific method, only later to become increasingly critical of such “science” as a product of an alienated society. Rather, in his early work he suggests a different definition of a scientific practice: it arises as a response to the embodied interests of subjects and reflects upon practices which are objects of concern for such subjects. It is *never* disinterested (or “pure”) observation or testing, but inevitably observes and tests in terms of a socially and historically situated context of inquiry. Consequently, the notion that Horkheimer increasingly came to abandon “science” for “philosophical critique” may well misunderstand a central question he was concerned to address in his work, namely, what should a materialist account of science as a form of inquiry entail? Instead of assuming a definition of what “science” is and what acceptance or rejection of it must require prior to probing Horkheimer’s essays, let us first examine his attempts to define science

⁸⁵ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 152-153. Benhabib’s interpretation is frequently drawn upon, cf. David Sherman, “Critical Theory,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Continental Philosophy*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 198.

in terms of a more basic category, as one practice of inquiry among others for an embodied social subject.

I will present four case studies which display Horkheimer's criticism of ways of theorizing that abstract cognition from affective embodiment. This will illustrate how he relates his understanding of thought as a form of inquiry to the task of theorizing itself and demonstrate that he does not set philosophical speculation over against empirical inquiry in his work in the 30s, as is supposed by Dubiel and Benhabib.

3.1. Horkheimer's inaugural address as director for the *Institut für Sozialforschung*

Horkheimer begins his inaugural address, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy" (1930), by investigating the idea that various forms of social theory are self-contained *Weltanschauungen* rooted in non-verifiable values ("articles of faith"),

Now it is precisely in this dilemma of social philosophy – this inability to speak of its object, namely the cultural life of humanity, other than in ideological [*weltanschaulich*], sectarian, and confessional terms, the inclination to see in the social theories of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Max Scheler differences in articles of faith rather than differences in true, false, or at least problematic theories—it is in this dilemma that we find the difficulty that must be overcome.⁸⁶

Horkheimer characterizes this way of interpreting a multiplicity of social theories as a "dilemma" because it ends the ability to offer comparative judgments regarding their truth. The dilemma is artificially resolved by contemporary social philosophers, he notes, in two diametrically opposed, yet mirroring, approaches to theory. On the one hand, there is a form of "material sociology which must investigate the specific forms of sociation" but "has nothing to say about the degree of reality or about the value of these phenomena,"⁸⁷ which Horkheimer earlier alludes to as a form of positivism in which "everything is exhausted in mere facts [*Tatsächlichkeiten*]."⁸⁸ On the other, there is "social

⁸⁶ Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research," in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 7-8.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 7.

philosophy” in which “there can be ultimate positions but no generally valid truths that are woven into broad and variegated investigations,” which Horkheimer describes, obliquely referencing *Lebensphilosophie*, as “the arbitrary ordainment of a new meaning for society, the state, law etc.”⁸⁹

The mistake that produces these mirroring distortions is the abstraction of theoretical “ultimate” positions and concrete empirical “investigation” from a concrete context of inquiry. Horkheimer is intent on giving an account of the way in which the concerns informing ultimate positions direct inquiry so that particular studies may be synthesized in terms of those concerns; yet he is also concerned to give an account of the way concrete empirical research conducted on the basis of such concerns alters and informs the concerns that give rise to it. He thus couples the two emphases, “Chaotic specialization will not be overcome by way of bad syntheses of specialized research results” (that is, by a situation in which the interests of theory are insulated from alteration on the basis of the results of inquiry), “just as unbiased empirical research will not come about by attempting to reduce its theoretical element to nothing” (that is, by a situation in which the synthesizing of various studies is misunderstood as pure description apart from the concerns informing inquiry). In contrast to both of these scenarios, Horkheimer continues,

This situation can be overcome to the extent that philosophy—as a theoretical undertaking oriented to the general, the ‘essential’—is capable of giving particular studies animating impulses, and at the same time remains open enough to let itself be influenced and changed by these concrete studies.⁹⁰

On the one hand, theory concerns itself with questions regarding “the degree of reality” or “the value” of the present social whole for its members. This concern offers “animating impulses” to inquiry. Theory postulates interests, teleological ends, and

⁸⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

hypotheses regarding how such interests and ends might be realized by a subject's self-conscious activity. On the other, it is "influenced and changed by ... concrete studies" into its object of inquiry; the concerns of theory and its hypotheses are not hermetically sealed off from the object of inquiry.

Positivism and various self-enclosed *Weltanschauungen* share in common the fact that they separate theory from a concrete context of inquiry. In the case of the former, theory is separated from the interests, ends, and hypotheses embodied in reflection on a practical context, i.e. the preconditions of inquiry. In the case of the latter, theory is separated from its empirical object of study, that by which the tenets of competing theories regarding interests, ends, and the activities that realize them may be tested. This, in sum, is what Horkheimer means by claiming both evidence a lack of "dialectical penetration."

In several essays published between 1932-1937, Horkheimer investigates various prominent forms of theory and argues in a parallel fashion in each case that a given alternative to his theory abstracts from either the affective states of subjects that are the preconditions of inquiry (in the case of neo-Kantianism and positivism), or from the empirical experience of subjects that is the proper object of inquiry (in the case of *Lebensphilosophie*). Each theory misconstrues inquiry as something other than a social practice for embodied subjects, and Horkheimer in each case suggests ways of correcting this mistake by reintroducing a relation to either affective embodiment or empirical testing that has been elided. We will first examine his critique of neo-Kantian rationalism and *Lebensphilosophie* in "On Bergson's Metaphysics of Time" and "The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Society" (both written in 1934), before turning to examine his critique of the Vienna Circle in "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics" (1937).

3.2. The critique of Neo-Kantianism and *Lebensphilosophie*

In his essays comparing *Lebensphilosophie* with various forms of rationalism, Horkheimer traces a dichotomy characterizing social philosophy in 1930s Weimar. On one hand, he notes, stand various schools of thought that hold that reasoning, understood broadly as the ordering and subsuming of sensuous experience using concepts, renders the world more intelligible, while affect risks obscuring the proper functioning of reasoning. For Horkheimer's purposes, this sensibility may be understood broadly, including both those who believe such concepts arise exclusively from experience and those who believe certain concepts to be given a-priori (though we will focus particularly on his interaction with neo-Kantian idealism). On the other, he continues, stand various adherents to *Lebensphilosophie*, who privilege the access to reality given vis-à-vis affect and intuition, and argue that discursive concepts distort the subject's immediate relation to reality.

Both sides are astute, he maintains, in noting the others' flaws. Thus Horkheimer delights in Henri Bergson's criticism of the way in which scientific concepts have become abstracted from their origin in practical life and transmogrified by "dogmatic philosophy" from one way of presenting reality, which is instrumentally useful for subjects, into depictions of reality in-itself.⁹¹ Concepts are, Horkheimer affirms, practical ways of grasping a prior manifold of intuition for a historical subject. Yet Horkheimer also appreciates Heinrich Rickert's critique of *Lebensphilosophie's* alternative emphasis on intuitive immediacy.⁹² Even if conceptualization abstracts for practical

⁹¹ Horkheimer, "On Bergson's Metaphysics of Time," trans. Frances Stracey, *Radical Philosophy*, no. 131 (May-June 2005): 11. Horkheimer concludes a description of Bergson by noting, "[Bergson] has set forth natural science as a function related to praxis and criticized the philosophical hypostatization of its foundational categories and methods."

⁹² Horkheimer, "The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Society," in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 226, concludes a summary of Rickert's *Die Philosophie des Lebens* by noting, "The devaluation of conceptual thought in favor of a mere surrendering to experience is ... an anti-intellectual and thus simply a regressive standpoint."

reasons from a prior experience of intuitive immediacy, this abstraction may not be conflated with a distortion of such immediacy. Rather experiences of the manifold can only be comprehended and acted upon by embodied social subjects through conceptual determination. Horkheimer neatly summarizes his appreciation and critique of both schools by quoting Hegel's *Logic*. *Lebensphilosophie* privileges a true element of thought which neo-Kantianism suppresses, for "analysis 'really transforms the concrete into an abstract.'" There is an affect-inflected embodied intuition of the manifold prior to cognitive determination, which judgment mediates by highlighting certain relations between intuitions among a myriad of others. Yet in contrast to the neo-Kantians, "It fails to grasp ... that 'that division must take place' if comprehension is to be possible at all" (such determination is unavoidable if subjects wish to understand and act in relation to the manifold).⁹³

Developing this argument, Horkheimer notes that each side commits three errors. First, both privilege an aspect of thought, either affective intuition or discursive reflection, as the exclusive conduit for true knowledge.⁹⁴ Second, each misunderstands the resultant knowledge as an a-historical depiction of reality, thus as knowable by any given subject.⁹⁵ Third, and most important for our purposes, each fails to appreciate the way affect and conceptual determination are related in the act of thought. Horkheimer wishes to argue that to abstract conceptualizing from affect like the neo-Kantians misunderstands how the latter motivates and constrains thought as an activity of interested inquiry. Yet to abstract affective intuition from conceptualizing like the

⁹³ Ibid., 237-238.

⁹⁴ Horkheimer, "Bergson's Metaphysics," 9-10, thus notes that *lebensphilosophie* exists historically as a problematic reaction to neo-Kantianism. The former signifies "the absolutization of the individual scientific methods ... as the only possible theoretical behavior," whereas the latter "spoke out against this defect and kept a relationship, even if a problematic one, to the questions which science left behind."

⁹⁵ For this critique applied to neo-Kantian "rationalism", see Horkheimer, "Rationalism Debate," 226; applied to *Lebensphilosophie*, see "Rationalism Debate," 243 and "Bergson's Metaphysics," 11-12.

lebensphilosophen mistakes how concepts enable the satisfaction of affective states through the diagnosis and alteration of existing practices. We will now examine this third claim.

Our interpretation differs from a typical approach to situating Horkheimer in relation to his contemporaries, and the difference is important. This approach argues that, however appreciative Horkheimer may have been of certain elements of *lebensphilosophie*, his “basic strategy is to reclaim aspects of rationalist idealism” as contrasted with forms of irrationalism like “*Lebensphilosophie*” and “the vitalism of Bergson and Klages.”⁹⁶ I will maintain, however, that Horkheimer’s ultimate goal is neither to critique irrationalism nor to retrieve particular aspects of rationalist idealism, but rather to demonstrate that both forms of thought are inverse ways of misunderstanding how affect and conceptualization relate in the activity of thinking. This misunderstanding short-circuits the reflective critique of social practices and may be repaired, Horkheimer thinks, by his own understanding of a thought as a form of inquiry.

Horkheimer wants to maintain, against the exclusive privileging of cognitive determination, that cognition is inseparable from affective preconditions. He thus attacks any sharp Kantian distinction between “concepts” which rationally order sense-experience, and sensuous “intuitions,” the way sense-experience is received by embodied desiring subjects,

Thought—as an active yet completely empty form—is supposed to bring forth ‘the world’ from the sensuous material of knowledge. ...

⁹⁶ Rush, “Conceptual Foundations” 12. Rush does not deny Horkheimer’s appreciation of certain features of “early” *lebensphilosophie*, such as its rejection of instrumentalized industrial life and its embrace of sensual happiness. For historical discussions of this appreciation, note: Martin Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, 48-49; Hauke Brunkhorst, “Romanticism, rationality and alienation- the Triple-H-theory revisited,” *History of European Ideas* 11 (1989): 838; Stirk, *Max Horkheimer*, 46-47; Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 136. Yet Horkheimer’s engagement with *lebensphilosophie* and neo-Kantianism is not simply an effort to pick and choose aspects of one form of thought or another, but an attempt to demonstrate and repair a mistaken way of relating affect and conceptualization in thinking.

This rigid juxtaposition of the two principles, out of whose combination the world is supposed to emerge is every bit as much a mystical legend as irrationalistic metaphysics itself.⁹⁷

Repeating the idea from “Materialism and Metaphysics” that thought begins in the middle of already existing relationships and practices, Horkheimer emphasizes the way needs motivate and direct cognitive reflection on already existing social habits and relationships, “The entire process of developing ... a [dialectical] construction ... is guided not merely by the object but by the level of intellectual development and the conscious and unconscious strivings of subjects as well.”⁹⁸ Summarizing this understanding, Horkheimer notes in a crucial passage, “thought as activity ... is in no way merely opposed to outlook and feeling, but rather, takes up the immediately given only in true contexts.” Hegel’s dialectic, he continues, illustrates “in the thought process itself conditionality, limits and lacks in its own forms.”⁹⁹ Thought thus cannot be reified as a self-sufficient or self-enclosed activity of the mind. It arises, as an activity for embodied humans, in relation to affective feelings and desires. *Lebensphilosophie* thus properly fronts the affective or intuitive elements of thought elided by neo-Kantians.

If the central problem with separating cognition from affect is that a precondition of the use of concepts is lost to sight, separating affect from cognition forgets the fact that the formulation of concepts is a reflective activity that intends to satisfy the affective states of the subject. In order to illustrate the nuances of Horkheimer’s way of

⁹⁷ Horkheimer, “Rationalism Debate,” 226. This is a consistent theme in Horkheimer’s early thought. Stirk, *Max Horkheimer*, 112, thus notes that as early as his *habilitationsschrift*, *Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft als Bindeglied zwischen theoretischer und praktischer Philosophie*, Horkheimer subjected “the gap between concepts and sense impressions” to sustained critique. Cf. Abromeit, “Dialectic of Bourgeois Society,” 104, 109, 115-116, n. 70, who notes the same concern in Horkheimer’s dissertation, *Zur Antinomie der teleologischen Urteilskraft*, as well as his early lectures in the history of philosophy.

⁹⁸ Horkheimer, “Rationalism Debate,” 240-241. So closely knit are need and thought that Horkheimer concludes, “A god is incapable of knowing anything because it has no needs” (242).

⁹⁹ Horkheimer, “Bergson’s Metaphysics,” 18.

framing this latter objection to *lebensphilosophie*, one may begin by examining his appreciation of Bergson's critique of the concept as reductive.¹⁰⁰

Horkheimer notes that one cannot understand the concept of the will without grasping the embodied subject whose will it is. This necessarily includes an account of the subject's relation to the world (the "physical" objects of the will to which the subject stands in spatiotemporal relation), the intuitive sense-experiences of this world (which Horkheimer terms in the following passage the "idea" of it), concepts (the subject's reflection on these intuitive experiences, which Horkheimer terms "representation"), and the spontaneity of the subject (the way a subject applies the concept in relation to its already existing social and material life). Even this preliminary list illustrates that the concept "will" depends upon a double movement of abstraction and negation. To reach the concept, one must begin by abstracting certain features from a living whole (embodied subjectivity in relation to the world), "Neither will nor idea nor representation nor physical mechanism can be understood as that which they are without the consciousness that, and how, they have been notionally removed from the living psychological events in which they form, in turn, a particular unity."¹⁰¹ Then one must contrast the resultant abstraction with other similarly abstracted aspects of this living whole, "The determinate meaning of a concept is founded not through itself alone, but just as much, by the principle that limits it."¹⁰² The concept of will is thus not only a partial grasping based on an abstraction from what was originally a whole; further, even the concept *as* abstracted cannot be comprehended in its fullness but only partially through negative contrasts with other similarly abstracted concepts.

¹⁰⁰ He expresses the same appreciation for *Lebensphilosophie* generally in Horkheimer, "Rationalism Debate," 232-238.

¹⁰¹ Horkheimer, "Bergson's Metaphysics," 16.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Horkheimer thus agrees with Bergson's conclusion that "abstracted traits of events are never identical with real parts," and further that "their mere setting together therefore never reflects the original life of the object."¹⁰³ Both abstraction and definition through negation signal moments in which life is comprehended by a subject. This is why there can be no knowledge of "life" in-itself through discursive concepts. Bergson's insight, Horkheimer notes appreciatively, should lead to the "overcoming of metaphysics" because if concepts necessarily involve a moment of abstraction and negation, then, "all systems that place any concept in a fundamental position as a single principle that is supposed to contain all reality within itself [have] to fail as a result."¹⁰⁴

The question Horkheimer raises is whether, because mediation is always selective and partial, a double removal from "life," it exclusively foreshortens and erases meaning, distorting or emptying the particularity subsumed under it. This claim, he notes, does not itself follow from a correct understanding of the way concepts abstract. Bergson's insight that one cannot abstract and then determine the object without fundamentally foreshortening its meaning is, Horkheimer notes, itself too abstract. It treats the activity of conceptualization as a set of steps detached from subjectivity. One must rather attend, he argues, to the social and historical situation of the subject, which informs the sorts of reasons it has for using concepts or forming new ones. If one could "reverse" the abstraction involved in conceptualization to recover the qualitative particularity of the original intuitions from which it abstracts, one would not merely have the addition of innumerable particularities but the *loss* of something, "Since the formation of concepts is not merely a process of exclusion, but has in each instance a tendency determined by social and individual impulses and interests, in turn, the reversal

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

from concept to reality doesn't represent only an addition of peculiarities."¹⁰⁵ Concepts do not merely abstract from the particularity of intuitive sensuous experience. They are ways subjects choose to relate to such experiences on the basis of their interests and desires as these relate to existing social practices. A surplus of meaning arising from the embodied desire and intentionality of the subject is thus added to any mere representational ordering of intuitions in conceptualization.

Horkheimer's remarkable claim is that, similar to the neo-Kantians, Bergson assumes a view of concepts which abstracts them from the responsive activity of subjects to affective states. While concepts are understood by the adherents of *Lebensphilosophie* as reductive forms of description, as if in the grammar of life they simply stood in for nouns or adjectives, Horkheimer suggests that they be conceived as verbs, which shift with the social terrain the subject inhabits as ways of accomplishing socially-mediated purposes in response to embodied needs. Bergson's rejection of conceptual thought is thus based on the false conflation of concepts with the way they are misconstrued in "closed" systems, as preceding affective states and existing practices instead of arising in reflection upon them as an activity of a subject. Bergson thus critiques, not conceptuality, but a *reification* of conceptuality (the "frozen forms" of what is actually "a living act"). Horkheimer notes,

Without thereby giving away the knowledge contained in them, all theories are always to be adapted again to reality by means of reflection on their own preconditions and on the developing moments of the object. ... This entire intellectual social activity connected to practical tasks is called thought; ordering is in reality only an aspect of this, and the products of ordering – concepts and judgments fixed on symbols – are only frozen forms of this living act. ... By equating, in accordance with the worst parts of traditional logic and epistemology, conceptual thinking with the establishment of closed systems and leaving out of consideration its real function in the historical process, Bergson misconceives its truth and arrives at the erroneous belief that there is a capacity for truth existing besides thought and a myth which is to be formulated besides conceptual knowledge.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 17.

Horkheimer thus understands concepts as the expression of dynamic subjectivity, not the constitutive parts of a self-enclosed process of cognition, but one way the subject *qua* embodied social organism relates to its environment. While Bergson is thus right that concepts and judgments are abstracted from “life,” it is equally the case that they too cannot be separated and reified into something other than “life”: they are the activity of a subject intent on resolving practical tasks in terms of its interests and desires.

One can use Horkheimer’s understanding of thinking as a living human act to repair the mistake held in common by “rationalists” (neo-Kantians) and “irrationalists” (*Lebensphilosophie*). In contrast to rationalism, it is only as a part of a prior living process, as related to the needs, desires and interests of an embodied subject, that thought as objectifying or as “ordering” arises. Without the affect arising from sensuous embodiment, there is no concept. In contrast to irrationalism, intuition and affect are never experienced as such by subjects and do not reflect an intelligible meaning underlying historical practices, but are always experienced as reactions in relation to existing social practices as symptoms of the relationship between the subject and the practices it inhabits. Horkheimer thus concludes by noting that “intuition and sympathy [play] just as much a role in thought as establishing and ordering,” yet “as soon as these moments do not reflect themselves in their real function, changing according to the social situation, and instead are split up into a single and absolute method, their results become just so many phantasies and ideologies.”¹⁰⁷ The concept *qua* living act may not be abstracted from either its relation to intuitive “affect” or cognitive “ordering” without losing its intelligibility as an activity for an embodied subject.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 17-18.

3.3. The critique of positivism

In “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics,” Horkheimer exclusively addresses a philosophy which models itself after the natural sciences, and there can be little doubt that the prominence of the essay, coupled with its exclusive focus on “positivist” interlocutors, has led to the interpretation we have already explored, which construes Horkheimer’s work in the 30s as culminating in a radical turn away from the sciences. Careful attention to the essay, however, reveals that this common interpretive trope obscures Horkheimer’s intention. For he begins his argument in “Latest Attack” by outlining his interest in critiquing *two* understandings of inquiry. While he goes on to focus on the first, his claim regarding a second should suggest a broader frame within which the essay should be evaluated.

The first understanding of inquiry, Horkheimer notes, believes “that science is the only possible form of knowledge,”¹⁰⁸ insofar as “only ... purified experience in the strict sense it has received in natural science, is called knowledge.”¹⁰⁹ This definition turns on the ambiguous term “purified,” but in a subsequent contrast between this kind of inquiry and classical empiricism, Horkheimer clarifies his meaning. Despite understanding “science as a human product in a purely individualistic sense” (instead of recognizing its genesis in relation to social practices), classical empiricism still “contains at least this dynamic element—the relation to a knowing subject.” Positivism, by way of contrast, “disregards this relation altogether, even in its theory of the origin of concepts and judgments.”¹¹⁰ Horkheimer will thus focus in this essay on a way of understanding inquiry that abstracts description from what we have termed its affective precondition, the interests and desires of embodied subjects.

¹⁰⁸ Horkheimer, “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics,” in *Critical Theory*, 136.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 138.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 142.

The second form of inquiry, he continues, engages in “the deprecation of science as a mere intellectual technique answering to subordinate considerations of human existence.”¹¹¹ It thus claims that empirical investigation is unimportant, insofar as one may possess knowledge of the whole antecedent to and apart from such inquiry. Horkheimer lists as examples of this kind of inquiry various forms of metaphysics including “*Lebensphilosophie*.”¹¹²

One must not pass lightly over the fact that Horkheimer turns to a critique of positivism only after situating it carefully in terms of a broader program involving the critique of two divergent ways concept-use is related to inquiry. Further, he situates this caveat within a substantial introduction, in which he notes several examples of how the descriptive practices of science and metaphysics sit uneasily with one another. Yet he concludes that this incompatibility illustrates problems *with metaphysics*.¹¹³ Horkheimer thus situates an interest in critiquing a particular philosophical explanation of the significance of the natural sciences in terms of a clear indication of his preference for practices of empirical inquiry over metaphysical speculation. This introduction fits the pattern we have repeatedly seen in the other essays we have investigated: while Horkheimer critiques various ways of abstracting practices of inquiry from embodied subjectivity, nowhere does he draw the implication from this that a rejection of empirical inquiry, broadly, or any of the sciences, in particular, is necessary. Further, he consistently portrays his own efforts as attempts to articulate a theory which he self-consciously contrasts with speculative metaphysics. On the basis of this introduction, the prominent idea that the essay signals a rejection of “features of Horkheimer’s own early materialism” in favor of “the reautonomization of philosophy and the increasingly

¹¹¹ Ibid., 136.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 132-138.

radical criticism of science” should thus appear very questionable.¹¹⁴ The particular interpretive issue at stake in the examination of the essay is whether Horkheimer’s skepticism regarding the abstraction of cognition from affect in contexts of inquiry signals skepticism regarding the practice of scientific inquiry itself or rather a critique of one way of understanding such inquiry.

As we noted at the close of the previous section, Horkheimer claims that without affective desires regarding already existing social practices, there is no concept. He considers the seminal error of positivism that it does not attend to the necessary relationship between cognitive judgment and affective desire. For the positivist, he notes, “to know is neither to believe or hope.”¹¹⁵ Later he develops this claim in relation to the critical theorist’s interest in emancipation,

When an active individual of sound common sense perceives the sordid state of the world, desire to change it becomes the guiding principle by which he organizes given facts and shapes them into a theory. The methods and categories as well as the transformations of the theory can be understood only in connection with his taking of sides. ... Right thinking depends as much on right willing as right willing on right thinking.¹¹⁶

Highlighting the mutual relationship between knowing, desiring (or what Horkheimer terms “to believe or hope”), and willing is simply another way of expressing that conceptualization is an embodied activity. Positivists, by contrast, equate “true” concepts with accurate representations of physical realities. Thus they “regard corporeal things in their pure state (that is, completely abstracted from subjectivity and from human praxis) as concrete realities.”¹¹⁷ For Horkheimer, however, there is no *conceptual* knowledge of such physical states, only immediate sense-experiences. Horkheimer, as

¹¹⁴ John O’Neill and Thomas Uebel, “Horkheimer and Neurath: Restarting a Disrupted Debate,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (April 2004): 80. For a similar assessment of Horkheimer’s gradual turn from a critique of metaphysics to a critique of modern empiricism, note Abromeit, “Dialectic of Bourgeois Society,” 324 (cf. 473).

¹¹⁵ Horkheimer, “Latest Attack,” 138.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 162. Later Horkheimer notes that for the positivist, “Thought and will, the parts of the mental process, are severed conceptually.” (178-179).

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 146, n. 15.

we shall see, applies Kant's term for transcendental realists to this perspective, calling it "uncritical." Rather, corporeal objects are first experienced as a series of sense-intuitions which are then made "concrete" for the subject by the double abstraction involved in conceptual determination.

This does not mean, of course, that the intentional bracketing of the agent's perspective is always illicit, so long as such bracketing is understood as a kind of social practice which intends to address particular needs of historical agents. Horkheimer thus offers an instructive caveat,

The idea of radically eliminating the subject ... from the process of cognition generally ... is itself a principle of research that stands in need of careful restriction. The belief that this principle is essentially applicable in every moment of history leads, of necessity, to an unhistorical and uncritical conception of knowledge and to the hypostasis of particular methods of procedure employed by natural science.¹¹⁸

The agent neutral descriptions facilitating physics, for instance, are a useful social practice. Abstracting from particulars (e.g. the particular subject doing the investigating and the qualitative particularities of the objects under investigation) when inquiring into natural phenomena renders a form of universalizable knowledge that addresses certain needs of historical subjects. Horkheimer's critique is not *that* scientists engage in such abstraction, but that positivists mistake the activity of abstraction, itself an intentional "social practice" regarding objects, as if it were an immediate description of corporeal objects.

Already in "Notes on Science and the Crisis" (1932), Horkheimer claims that the scientific practices which lead to such universal validity claims are themselves results of an exercise of historical subjectivity, "The separation of theory and action is itself a historical phenomenon," he notes, so that "the reasons which justify rejecting the pragmatist theory of knowledge and relativism in general, do not lead to a positivist

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 147-148. Cf. a parallel discussion of physics in Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," 230.

separation of truth and action.”¹¹⁹ In the previous passage from “Latest Attack,” he concludes similarly. “The empiricist,” following the model of physics, “states that the meaning of all concepts of science is determined by physical operations. He fails to see that the concept of the corporeal, in the sense peculiar to its use in physics, involves a very special subjective interest, involves, indeed, the whole of social practice.”¹²⁰ After misunderstanding the social practice of physics, the positivist continues by making this misunderstanding a model for all other practices of description, thus leading to what Horkheimer terms an “unhistorical conception of knowledge.” Horkheimer’s point is thus not to critique the procedure employed by the natural sciences itself, but rather to understand it aright as a historically situated social practice.

Horkheimer concludes the essay by noting emphatically that he is not objecting to the activity of abstraction itself, “The endeavor of scientific research to see events in their more general connections in order to determine their laws, is a legitimate and useful occupation.” What he is objecting to is rather a “confusion” which “occurs if effort or action is reified as merely a state or event and is never grasped as the specific structure of the subject-object relation.”¹²¹ This formulation reflects precisely Horkheimer’s understanding of concepts as forms of activity, reflected consistently, as we have seen, in his essay on truth, his repair of forms of rationalism and irrationalism, and his way of conceiving of science as a social practice.

This is instructive for correcting recent evaluations of Horkheimer’s critique of positivism. O’Neill and Uebel, for instance, make the following distinction, which they take to be a decisive refutation of Horkheimer’s critique of Otto Neurath in “Latest Attack,”

¹¹⁹ Horkheimer, “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” in *Critical Theory*, 4.

¹²⁰ Horkheimer, “Latest Attack,” 146.

¹²¹ Horkheimer, “Latest Attack,” 150.

Logical empiricism is compatible with reflection on the sciences of a naturalistic kind, reflection that draws on the wider sciences, where science is being used in a broad sense to include any systematic empirical inquiry, including everyday empirical knowledge. In the work of Neurath the social and historical context of the sciences and role of social factors in the acceptance of scientific belief did form a central part of such reflection.¹²²

But Horkheimer does not deny that certain forms of positivism, including Neurath's, may allow reflection on the social and historical "conditions of knowledge" which situate the practice of the sciences. His argument does not regard the *scope* of the objects which positivism interrogates, but the way positivists understand *the role of the subject* in conceptualizing any object.¹²³

Horkheimer's interest in developing a materialist account of thought as a practice of inquiry is pervasive in his early work. I have argued that careful attention to this interest illustrates that the ubiquitous claim that Horkheimer shifts from a concern with the empirical sciences in the early 30s to a posture that eschews the sciences in favor of speculative philosophy later in the decade mistakes his consistent critique of one way of understanding the social practice of scientific inquiry with a critique of scientific inquiry itself. In the next chapter, I will note the way this materialist understanding of thought is developed by Horkheimer in his later essays. This will set the groundwork for understanding how his late reflections on instrumental reasoning and his turn to theology exemplify his understanding of thought as a pattern inquiry.

¹²² O'Neill and Uebel, "Horkheimer and Neurath," 85.

¹²³ Horkheimer writes to Adorno in correspondence regarding the essay's forthcoming publication, *A Life in Letters: Selected Correspondences*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 94, "The elimination of the concept of the subject to which you refer in your last letter is a main theme in my plan." In the essay itself, "Latest Attack," 145, he makes this explicit in relation to Neurath, "Everything designated by idealism as idea and end and, by materialism, as social practice and conscious historical activity, is related to science essentially as objects of observations and not as constitutive interests ..., insofar as empiricism concedes them to be conditions of knowledge at all (Otto Neurath)." He thus explicitly notes that Neurath allows the investigation of the historical and social conditions situating scientific practices, but notes that this does not repair a mistaken approach to the subject, which brackets the way its "constitutive interests" relate to the conceptualization of objects.

Chapter 2

Inquiry and critical research: Social theory and empirical inquiry in Horkheimer's mature work

As we noted in the introduction, the focus of Horkheimer's work in the 40s is often understood to shift from "a historically informed theory of society" to "a radical critique of reason" which "denounces the intimate connection between reason and domination."¹ Explaining this distinction, Habermas notes that in the 30s, "Horkheimer sought the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of philosophy in social theory," and held that "transformation into the social sciences offered the only chance of survival for philosophical thought."² This language about the "transformation" of philosophy into the social sciences describes Horkheimer's attempt to translate perennial questions in the history of philosophy into terms that allow them to become objects of research for the social sciences. To take one such example of "translation," in his inaugural lecture Horkheimer notes,

The project of investigating the relations between [the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture] is nothing but a reformulation—on the basis of the new problem constellation, consistent with the methods at our disposal and with the level of our knowledge—of the old question concerning the connection of particular existence and universal Reason, of reality and Idea, of life and Spirit.³

One wonders, of course, what gets lost in translation when there is a proposal to translate the concept of "Spirit," say, into the "economic life of society." Leaving aside this necessary question for the moment, it is sufficient for our purposes to note Habermas' argument. Horkheimer's early philosophical work, however broad-ranging

¹ Jürgen Habermas, "Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer's Work," trans. Kenneth Baynes and John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, eds. Seyla Benhabib et. al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 54.

² Ibid., 50.

³ Max Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research" (1930), in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, trans. G. Frederick Hunter et. al. (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995), 11-12.

its survey of philosophical topics, comes to rest firmly in an empirical analysis of social practices. His work from the 40s, by contrast, is untethered from this empirical concern. For Horkheimer, notes Habermas, “The hope that there is a dialectical tension within the historical process itself ... proved empty.” Consequently, in his essays and monographs from the decade, “the only goal is to break out of the continuum of history” such that “historically observable tendencies lose any serious interest.”⁴ In this analysis, Habermas does not depart from the basic typology outlined by Helmut Dubiel in his now standard *Theory and Politics*,

Whereas [Horkheimer’s] materialist period considered philosophy the integrating medium of interdisciplinary theory construction (and sought, programmatically, the unification of philosophy and science), and whereas the Critical Theory period took Marx’s economic critique as the orienting, paradigmatic unity of philosophy and the specialized sciences, in this third period philosophy is a mental preserve, a critical island, an encapsulation resistant to the instrumentalistic *Zeitgeist*. Philosophy defines its role as one of the resistance to the spirit of the specialized sciences.⁵

I have already raised critical questions about the distinction drawn by Dubiel and Benhabib between Horkheimer’s treatment of the sciences in the “materialist” and “critical theory” periods of his work.⁶ I shall now turn to the relationship (or lack thereof) between philosophy and the sciences in Horkheimer’s work from the 40s.

What is striking about Habermas and Dubiel’s account is its tidiness. As is well known, Horkheimer continued to author reflections on empirical method as well as various research studies throughout his mature career. These studies exist alongside a series of philosophical reflections on the shape reasoning has come to take in late modern life. At issue, therefore, is how to relate “the empirical” and “the philosophical” Horkheimer. Habermas and Dubiel express a standard approach in the secondary literature: Horkheimer’s empirical essays in the 40s and 50s are, at best, adiaphorous,

⁴ Habermas, “Development of Horkheimer’s Work,” 54.

⁵ Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 95.

⁶ Cf. Chapter 1, section 3.

appended uneasily to a body of work otherwise characterized by metaphysical speculation. They support this argument with reference to a survey of four works: “The Authoritarian State” (1940), “The End of Reason” (1942), *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), and *Eclipse of Reason* (1947), and in so doing, follow a way of selecting texts which has become typical in the secondary literature.⁷

In this chapter I shall investigate several of Horkheimer’s texts from the 40s and early 50s that are left to the side by this interpretive consensus, and argue that they demonstrate Horkheimer’s development of his early account of a materialist logic. In subsequent chapters, I then return at length to the “standard” texts with new eyes. This difference in method is intended to reconsider what precisely is peripheral and what is central to Horkheimer’s mature theorizing. I shall argue that the standard account misunderstands the significance of both the “empirical” and “philosophical” aspects of Horkheimer’s later work, as well as their relationship to each other. In this chapter and the next, I begin by re-considering the place of Horkheimer’s empirical studies in his late theorizing. This chapter outlines the mature development of his early understanding of thought as a form of inquiry, now situated in an account of the research activity of the social critic. The next argues that this mature account governs his attempts to repair diagnostic failures in his earlier understanding of political economy and the family. In the final three chapters, I turn to re-examine the content of his late philosophical and theological reflections in the light of these empirical studies.

⁷ Habermas, “Development of Horkheimer’s Work,” 53-58. Reflecting this focus, Dubiel, *Theory and Politics*, 88, notes, “The most concise formulation of theory development in the 1940s is *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of 1944 [which Dubiel pairs with *Eclipse of Reason*]; yet the themes developed there are already intimated in the writings of Horkheimer and Adorno as early as 1939, and most clearly in Horkheimer’s essay ‘Reason and Self-Preservation’ [this essay is known to English audiences by its original title, “The End of Reason”] published in 1942.”

1. Horkheimer's late research methodology (I):
"Critical research" as a form of induction

1.1. Horkheimer's logic:
On the relation of induction to contexts of inquiry

In a concise series of notes published in 1941, Horkheimer explicitly reflects upon "the prevailing methodological viewpoints" of "critical social research" in an attempt to explain several axioms directing researchers at the *Institut*.⁸ He advances, in some detail, a claim regarding the relation of practices of research to a theory of the social whole, through an analysis of how critical researchers should regard induction. Critical research, he notes, accepts in common with the social sciences that "social concepts are 'inductively' formed."⁹ Yet he proceeds to define induction in a unique way. Critical researchers accept

the hypothesis that society is a "system" in the material sense that every single social field or relation contains and reflects, in various ways, the whole itself. Consequently, an intensive analysis of a single relation or institution that is particularly representative of the prevailing pattern of reality may be far better able to develop and grasp the nature of the pattern than would an extensive compilation and description of assorted facts. The "pervasive" character of our society, the fact that it makes its peculiar relations felt in every nook and cranny of the social whole, calls for a methodological conception that will take account of this fact. Categories have to be formed through a process of induction that is the reverse of the traditional inductive method which verified its hypothesis by collecting individual experiences until they attained the weight of universal laws. Induction in social theory, *per contra*, should seek the universal within the particular, not above or beyond it, and, instead of moving from one particular to another and then to the heights of abstraction, should delve deeper and deeper into the particular and discover the universal law therein.¹⁰

Horkheimer characterizes his way of relating particular practices to the whole as a "hypothesis." Following his language, one might call it the "pervasiveness" hypothesis because his inductive method is based upon the premise that certain practices uniquely permeate and characterize modern society. The thesis regarding pervasiveness is a

⁸ Horkheimer, "Notes on Institute Activities," in *Critical Theory and Society: a Reader*, eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), 264.

⁹ Ibid., 266.

¹⁰ Ibid.

“hypothesis” because it is a fallible interpretation of empirical experience which both informs and then is tested by inquiry, a contingent reality known *a-posteriori*, not a necessary feature of social life as such. In certain societies, singularly pervasive practices may not exist at all, or may exist in a qualitatively different way than in this one.

For Horkheimer, method is thus shaped from the outset by its historical object of reflection. The most basic logical axiom of his inductive theorizing, the ability to infer from a description of particular practices an analysis of a rule governing the social whole, is not presented as a basic postulate known *a-priori*, but is presented as a hypothesis about the form of reasoning appropriate to the contingent shape contemporary society has taken. A critical logic responds to an already existing set of experiences and corresponding concerns as an experientially informed pattern of inference intended to diagnose and resolve an already existing irritant motivating inquiry. As Horkheimer argues in a later aphorism entitled “Spirit,” “content has significance in the meaning of an intellectual structure,”

Expression cannot truly be detached from what is expressed. Only in abstract science, and even there only where it is mere execution whose meaning is tacitly presupposed, can form and content be separated without becoming something else. Logic in itself is untrue, as is everything that merely needs but lacks it.¹¹

As this illustrates, for Horkheimer, a difficulty like Hume’s problem of induction testifies to the dependency of patterns of reasoning on already existing social practices: induction is only problematic if one supposes that the relation of part to whole established by inference is not contingent (and thus is based on something other than a “hypothesis” arising from experience). For a materialist understanding of induction, however, the various patterns of inference detailed in logics arise from historical social relations and reflect back upon them, thus beginning in the middle of an already existing

¹¹ Horkheimer, “Spirit” (1959-1960), in *Dawn and Decline: Notes, 1926-1931 & 1950-1969*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 197.

set of practices as a mode of reflective activity for a subject. The form of induction proper to critical research thus cannot be abstracted from an experience of the already existing social whole, nor from concerns which motivate the theorist.

1.2. Two forms of induction:

Distinguishing critical and traditional forms of research

Rather than focusing in detail on a materialist account of logic, Horkheimer describes in his “Notes” how the particular method of induction used by the critical theorist is distinguished from another closely related method for relating part to whole. This contrast illustrates both his understanding of the object of critical inquiry as well as the way the descriptions rendered by such inquiry facilitate critique. It is thus decisive for understanding his late essays.

Horkheimer notes two different ways of conceiving of concepts (which he also terms “categories” or “laws”) formed through induction, that rely on two alternate ways of conceiving of the object of inductive inquiry. For Horkheimer, concepts formed through induction may be understood:

(1): As the reflection of a set of *experiences of objects*; in this case, concepts are taken to name associations between what Horkheimer terms “individual experiences” or simply “assorted facts.”

(2): As the reflection of the experience of a *social relation* between subjects regarding objects; concepts are then taken to name what Horkheimer terms a “social field” or more simply a social “relation.”

Horkheimer connects these two views of what is referenced by a concept with two corresponding ways of conceiving of the kind of inquiry conducted by research. One may conceive of the inductive method:

(1'): As an inquiry into "assorted facts" that yield observations regarding their common marks. Horkheimer terms this the "traditional" method (alluding to his earlier essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory"). In this case, the observation of the marks that a set of particular "facts" has in common determines the content named by the concept.

(2'): As an inquiry into the social relation(s) that are expressed by already-existing historical concepts. This yields observations regarding a social relation: how the relation expressed by the concept takes on its character, and in turn shapes other such relations, as well as the way subjects inhabiting the relation participate in and are affected by it. In this case, one may gradually make explicit other social relations and experiences of inhabitants that are implicitly related to the particular social relation(s) a concept names.

The first way of understanding induction, Horkheimer notes, treats a claim about a pervasive practice (like competition between social agents) as a hypothesis about assorted facts making up reality. One confirms or denies such a hypothesis by accruing a certain quantity of empirical experiences that corroborate or refute the hypothesis, and once one has attained a certain threshold of experiences one may take the hypothesis to be a "law." Thus, "the traditional inductive method ... verified its hypothesis by collecting individual experiences until they attained the weight of universal laws." In the second way, a description reveals aspects of the meaning of the concept *qua* social relation, though one cannot, *per definitionem*, plumb the depth of a given relation, for to do so would be to have perfect knowledge of the social whole of which it is a part (thus to be a god). This is one reason for apparently mystical statements in the later Horkheimer, such as the following riposte that ends the aforementioned note on logic, "Spirit," "What is true is the whole, which ultimately eludes us, thus making all the work

of the mind both abstract and untrue, however true it may be.”¹² Properly understood, this is not the negation of positive predication, let alone nihilistic pessimism, but a Hegelian recognition of the dependency of the truth of any concept on the historical and social mediations it expresses, coupled with a humility that Hegel did not always possess regarding the open-ended nature of the subject’s historical knowledge of such concepts.

Horkheimer wants to sharply distinguish the second understanding of induction from the first. The reason for this is evident: one cannot verify a hypothesis about social relations by compiling a certain quantity of facts, if what is meant by “facts” are experiences of corporeal reality. For this already takes what is represented by the concept to be something other than a social relation: it explains as the marks of a corporeal “object” what the second form of inquiry wishes to explain as marks of social relations regarding an object.¹³ By contrast, Horkheimer argues in his “Notes,” “Induction ... should seek the universal within the particular,” and again, “one must delve deeper and deeper into the particular.” If the particular is understood as a corporeal “fact” about the world, then to speak of finding “the universal” *within* it is nonsense (for the universal is conceptually postulated by abstracting commonalities *between* particulars). But if the particular is understood as an expression of social relations regarding an object, and research is understood as the attempt to trace out the various ways the relation referenced by the concept is mediated by and in turn exemplifies constellations of social practices characteristic of a social whole, then “delving” for the universal seems a fitting task for a researcher.

¹² Ibid., 197.

¹³ I am indebted for this formulation to discussions held in a postgraduate seminar led by Dr. Nicholas Adams on Hegel’s *Phenomenology* at the University of Edinburgh in Autumn, 2007.

Another suggestive way of framing “delving” is as the attempt to represent what once appeared to agents in a form of life as a brute fact as the genesis of various historical and social relations. As Horkheimer notes, “The process of forming these categories [on the basis of inductive research] must take into account the historical character of the subject matter to which they pertain, and in such a way that the categories are made to include the actual genesis of that subject matter.”¹⁴ This, it should be emphasized, is the task of tracing the social mediation of the taken for granted appearance of objects. The point of the critical researcher is to enable subjects in a form of life to recognize themselves, their own desires, projects, and activities as social creatures, in the content of concepts. For if concepts are understood as reflecting that which is entirely “over against” the subject, then agents that have become dissatisfied with social practices of mediation have no way of thinking about how they might reflectively alter them.

In a later reflection on method entitled “Against Doctrines of Essence,” Horkheimer draws an instructive musical parallel that develops this point as well as making the emancipatory interest informing his reflections on conceptuality explicit,

In the sphere of the concept, it is the same as in music. What an element is only becomes apparent in its progression. It is true that three successive, identical tones are not nothing but something. But a three-part rhythm, something complete in itself, and the beginning of a Mozart melody, are two different worlds, and one should not believe that the former is really the fundamental, the “natural” one, that it serves better to define the “essence” than a definite melody. The error probably underlies almost all doctrines of essence, even if one tries to define man’s essence through his existence as an individual. But for that very reason, the statement an abstract philosophical doctrine makes does not tell us very much unless the place and tone allow us to infer its inevitable political consequences. One must know the entire melody. That all thinking will thus always remain fragmentary is no objection to the demand that it be carried as far as possible.¹⁵

¹⁴ Horkheimer, “Notes,” 264.

¹⁵ Horkheimer, “Against Doctrines of Essence” (1956), in *Dawn and Decline*, 134-135.

One might understand a “concept” as a particular reflection of one aspect of the “rhythm” of reality, as a common mark defining a set of objects constructed on the basis of repeated identical sensory experiences of objects. Horkheimer does not deny that this has intuitive plausibility. Identical sensory intuitions do form such rhythms for subjects. Yet, to understand this as what a *concept* refers to is a mistake. Concepts are not reflections of the “rhythm”; rather, they are reflections of the melody of various rhythms in relation. This is why the introduction of a different affect or a different project can alter the melody (or appearance) of the sensory rhythm of the object. This further clarifies, Horkheimer notes, why concepts of discrete “objects” or rhythms can only be understood in terms of broader social totalities that situate the activities and affective states which refract the appearance of the object. Humans are not infinite, thus the knowledge contained in a given concept is limited, open to development, and falsifiable. Horkheimer does not infer an abstract relativism from this: though the knowledge of the concept is always partial (for there is no final knowledge of the whole) and delimited (by various historical contexts of inquiry), this does not mean that there are not more or less accurate ways of understanding the content of concepts.

The “general” concept sought by the critical researcher is therefore *not* a concept of the marks under which a whole set of “empirical objects” may be subsumed (as is the case in traditional induction). This is crucial, as the concept is understood by Horkheimer here in a qualitatively different way than the object of critique often associated with the later work of Horkheimer and Adorno. Horkheimer’s conclusion is not that concepts should be critiqued as essentializing the qualitative particularity of the object; rather, the concept is presented here as the outcome of critical research into social relations. Horkheimer thus notes in a broader passage we will examine that if one were to investigate the “concrete content” of such a concept, it could not be “dissolved

into a multitude of empirical facts.” Rather, a concept is general to the extent it describes a “given social configuration,” and further has been “related to the whole of the historical process of which it is an indissoluble part.” A concept is thus “general” for the researcher when the particular social relation described by it has been traced with regard for the social practices constituting its appearance. Here, in full, is how Horkheimer describes the process of analysis for a researcher which generates such a concept:

The category is ... led, by the very nature of its concrete content, to take in other, different sectors of the given social configuration and to follow out the genesis and import of its content within the social totality. The general concept is thus not dissolved into a multitude of empirical facts but is concretized in a theoretical analysis of a given social configuration and related to the whole of the historical process of which it is an indissoluble part. Such analysis is essentially critical in character.¹⁶

Such a “general” concept is thus a desirable product of careful research generated by critical induction.

To thus note, as Horkheimer does at the outset of this reflection, that he has a hypothesis about a pervasive practice, is not to claim that every particular social relation must be described in terms of the “marks” of that practice (in this case, let us say, that every practice must be described in terms of the marks of a certain form of economic “competition”). That would be to conceive of the concept as a totalizing set of common marks to which all descriptions must necessarily conform. Rather, it is to say that the researcher intends to investigate every particular practice in late capitalism as, in some way, conditioned by this practice. This is not therefore an *a-priori* description of the totality sealed off from the practice of inquiry, but a “hypothesis” intended to guide the examination of particular practices, for the purpose of resolving what Horkheimer takes to be suffering arising from the “pervasive” practice.

¹⁶ Ibid., 265.

The distinction Horkheimer draws in these reflections is not, it bears repeating, between scientific observation (which only perceives the empirical “appearance” of objects) and philosophical speculation (which plumbs the depths of the “essence” underlying and uniting such phenomena). He is not distinguishing two methods of knowing, the scientific and the speculative, but rather two ways of conceiving the object of inquiry. Horkheimer does not advocate here speculation regarding essences that cannot be accessed by empirical inquiry, but rather a particular way of understanding the practice of inquiry itself.¹⁷

That Horkheimer continues to understand his account as a properly reflective way of practicing the sciences, not as a speculative appeal to abandon them, is evident from his later note “On Scientific Theory,”

The average empirical sociologist these days is totally naïve vis-à-vis the prevailing schematism. Through the concept of “facts,” he posits as absolute both a form of perception which is conditioned down to the most insignificant detail, and all the conscious and unconscious interests which organize the world, and then calls “theory” the systematic presentation of these “facts.” But such theory lacks self-awareness.¹⁸

The idea of making science “conscious” of itself is not an abstract negation of the sciences. Rather, Horkheimer notes that the social practices of a given period, informed as they are by the interests, desires and common projects of agents (“all the conscious and unconscious interests which organize the world”) are a “schematism.” The schematism does not generate the external world, but mediates the experience of it by a social subject. In so doing, however, it constrains the form of its appearance, because the method, goals, and products of the sciences are intricately related to the former side of the subject-object relation, and are thus “conditioned” by social practices “down to

¹⁷ Contrary to the claim of John O’Neill and Thomas Uebel, “Horkheimer and Neurath: Restarting a Disrupted Debate,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (April 2004): 82, Horkheimer thus recognizes that, in their words, “claims about the actual nature of a social order as opposed to the appearances it generates must themselves be open to empirical control.”

¹⁸ Horkheimer, “On Scientific Theory” (1957-1958), in *Dawn and Decline*, 143.

the most insignificant detail.” A properly reflective science is one that refuses to take the products of the subject-object relation as reflections of essence or brute “fact,” thus enabling inquiry into the schema, and, by implication, allowing new disclosures and discoveries regarding the other side of the subject-object relation as a consequence of changes in social practices.

1.3. Critical induction and the unification of the sciences

In order to illustrate the centrality of this understanding of inquiry to Horkheimer’s late work, I will first note examples Horkheimer offers in his “Notes” regarding how a reinterpretation of the products of the various specialized sciences may be incorporated by a critical researcher in her conceptualizations of social practices. In the next section, I will reverse this approach and illustrate Horkheimer’s understanding of the distinct contributions of two of the specialized sciences for research, noting the intimate relation of both sciences to the judgments offered by the critical theorist *qua* philosopher.

In the midst of his account of critical research, Horkheimer notes a particular example, the sociological concept of “the masses,” to demonstrate what he means by the difference between traditional and critical approaches to concept formation. He begins by noting that “abstract” categories formulated without socio-historical qualification have no place in the development of theory.¹⁹ With this caveat in place, he proceeds to note that the concepts employed by the theorist cannot be developed from either “quantitative analysis” of the atomized individuals making up the masses, or from a qualitative study of various types of “collective behavior.”²⁰ He thereby frames his discussion of the way the concept of “the masses” should be understood in terms of two inadequate approaches. In referencing “quantitative analysis” he alludes to the

¹⁹ Horkheimer, “Notes,” 264.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 264-265.

survey approach pioneered by American sociologists.²¹ Amassing surveys of the discrete agents that make up a mass without analyzing the social and economic practices that shape and direct such individuals, often quite apart from their conscious awareness, artificially abstracts an analysis of an agent from an analysis of the social practices she inhabits. In referencing “character types,” he alludes to the social psychology of neo-Freudians like Karen Horney and Erich Fromm.²² While such social psychology does not presume the atomic individual as its empirical nodal point, it similarly abstracts the psychic dynamics of group interaction from the historical and social practices that qualify such interaction, referencing instead universal accounts of the “nature” of humans as such.²³

Following a pattern we observe in his early essays, Horkheimer does not frame the approach of the critical researcher as the abstract negation of either of these methods, but rather as a repair of a flawed presupposition they have in common. If either approach severs an empirical object of analysis from its relation to social and historical practices, the goal of the critical theorist is to reverse this abstraction, interpreting the products of these specialized sciences in relation to their genesis in social and historical practices.

Proper methodological usage must recognize that the masses are basically different at the different stages of the sociohistorical process and that their function in society

²¹ For a depiction of Horkheimer’s interest in the method of American social scientists, note John Duane Abromeit, “The Dialectic of Bourgeois Society: An Intellectual Biography of the Young Max Horkheimer, 1895-1937” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2004), 299-304.

²² For a description of Horkheimer and Adorno’s relationship to Horney and Fromm, note Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 270-273.

²³ Horkheimer offers this critique of psychoanalysis in “Sociological Background of the Psychoanalytic Approach,” in *Anti-Semitism: A Social Disease*, ed. Ernst Simmel (New York: International Universities Press, 1946), 9. “The fate of the world is determined, to a great extent, by the operation of economic laws beyond the control of man, rather than by the ‘nature’ of man, whatever that term may connote. Thus it is impossible to resolve the crises of occidental culture by simply going back to its human sources, even to those buried in the depths of the unconscious.”

is essentially determined by that of other social strata as well as by the peculiar social and economic mechanisms that produce and perpetuate the masses.²⁴

Understood in such a way, survey-analysis or an analysis of group psyches “may be an integral part of any attempt at a theoretical interpretation of the term.”²⁵ The task of the critical theorist is thus to resituate a given analytic description in terms of her particular inquiry into a pervasive social practice characterizing the whole, in a way that does not neglect the unique aspects of the practice described by the various specialized sciences. This recasts the multiplicity of analytic descriptions offered by the various specialized sciences in terms of a unifying synthetic category (the concept of a “social practice,” which has various related aspects studied by the specialized social sciences), and a unifying context of inquiry, an irritation regarding a pervasive social practice which motivates the theorist in the synthetic activity of diagnosis and repair. In a summary of the research method which would eventually produce *Studies in Prejudice*,²⁶ Horkheimer thus notes that concepts derived from research into anti-Semitism as a social relation necessarily transcend the boundaries of the various specialized sciences used in empirical study, however much they may illumine various aspects of the social relation,

For a year ... the Institute of Social Research at Columbia University has been engaged in the study of anti-Semitism. The longer the problem is studied, the more conflicting and the more profound do its implications appear. It must be immediately acknowledged that an arbitrary division of social sciences into sociology, psychology, social psychology, and so forth, cannot be maintained. Every concept used in our study of anti-Semitism has social, psychological, philosophic implications.²⁷

Minimally, we may thus say that Horkheimer’s late research activity stands in continuity with his mature reflections on a materialist conception of inquiry.

²⁴ Horkheimer, “Notes,” 265.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ For a historical survey of the contents of the *Studies*, note Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*, 408-430.

²⁷ Horkheimer, “Sociological Background,” 2.

Horkheimer proceeds to outline in the “Notes” a concrete example of how the understanding of induction implicit in critical research might shape the development of a concept like “youth,” as distinguished from the approach of the particular specialized sciences. He notes,

The peculiar kind of induction we have just outlined makes the formation of social concepts an empirical process and yet distinguishes this from the empirical method employed in the specialized sciences. For example, the concept of “youth,” denoting a particular entity in present-day society, is not a biological, psychological, or sociological concept, for it takes in the entire social and historical process that influences the mentality and orientation of youth and that constantly transforms these. Consequently, our concept will assume different functions *pari passu* with the changing composition, function, and attitudes of youth within the shifting social pattern. And owing to the fact that the concept is to be formed under the aspect of the historical totality to which it pertains, sociology should be able to develop this changing pattern from the very content of the concept instead of adding specific contents from without.

In this way, the various categories will be integrative ones through their very content and may themselves serve as the basis for combining the experiences and results of the various special sciences without being impeded by their several fixed boundaries.²⁸

On the one hand, the concept of “youth” originates in a particular discipline, sociology, and “is to be formed under the aspect of the historical totality to which it pertains.” In a similar way, from “photosynthesis” to “id,” every scientific practice produces concepts as a result of the unique focus of its inquiry. What is referenced immediately by the concept may thus be descriptions produced by an observational practice (in this case, say, a sociologist’s survey). Yet the “facts” captured in the survey are constituted and conditioned by a “social pattern” which they reflect: a factoid derived from a survey has its genesis in the social practices of historical subjects. Consequently a particular concept like “youth” for a critical researcher may not be restricted to “a biological, psychological, or sociological concept,” for although it may originate in a specialized science as a result of a sociologist’s survey, the truth of “youth” as a concept for a

²⁸ Horkheimer, “Notes,” 266.

critical researcher exceeds the way the specialized science portrays it. Such portrayals present aspects of a “social and historical process” or a “social pattern” and it is this “process” or “pattern,” related as this is to pervasive practices constituting the social whole, which is, recall, the object of critical inquiry. Instead of simply amassing various “instances” of a taken for granted fact without inquiring into the social relations generating the present immediacy of its repetitive appearance, the critical researcher must “delve” by examining the products of the specialized sciences as various aspects of a constellation of social relations.

Horkheimer is emphatic that this activity is no less an “empirical process,” even though it may be “[distinguished] from the empirical method employed in the specialized sciences.” The various products of the specialized sciences are no less then required in order to form an understanding of “youth” as the genesis of a constellation of historical and social practices. For instance, the social relations that constitute the genesis of the concept “youth” are social relations for psychic and embodied subjects. An investigation of the concept of youth must therefore utilize various disciplines like psychology or biology. The “facts” as they are presented by these corresponding disciplines, such as “rebellion against authority” or the adolescent “sex drive,” are important aspects of practices for embodied subjects that inhabit them, just as other sets of practices which condition the sociological concept of youth – like the contemporary form of the family– in turn help to determine how one is to evaluate psychological or biological concepts like “rebellion” and “sex-drive.”

Each concept in a specialized science is thus not simply a reflection of “facts” in the world, but rather describes, under various aspects, constellations of social relations between subjects. This is why Horkheimer notes that “the various categories” regarding social practices which he hopes to generate through the practice of induction “will be

integrative ones through their very content and may themselves serve as the basis for combining the experiences and results of the various special sciences.” Horkheimer wishes to maintain that such research is a precondition for the critical judgment of the theorist *qua* philosopher. Let us examine this claim.

2. Horkheimer’s late research methodology (II): The specialized sciences in the service of social critique

In the “Notes” a clear picture of how Horkheimer relates the concepts of the various specialized sciences emerges: the “inductive” method pursued by critical social research provides a basis for the unification of the sciences in a concrete context of inquiry because it relates them as explanations of various aspects of its object, social practices. Attention may now be paid to how Horkheimer differentiates the uniqueness of the various sciences in relation to his understanding of this unity, i.e. his account of how different scientific forms of inquiry relate to different aspects of social practices, as well as how this research serves as a precondition for the judgments regarding social practices forwarded by the theorist *qua* philosopher. We will focus on his treatment of psychology, sociology, and philosophy, for he takes these three to be the most pertinent disciplines for a critical theory of society.

2.1. Alienation and Embodiment: Psychology and Critique

Insofar as critique presumes that subjects have embodied desires and drives that are mediated by their social life in a way that fails to satisfy subjects, it requires:

- (1): A description of the way affective desires and instinctual drives are experienced by subjects inhabiting social practices.

Psychology, Horkheimer notes, offers such a description: it notes the relation of embodied states to social practices. For instance, in an essay entitled “Ernst Simmel and Freudian Philosophy” (1948), Horkheimer notes that Freud reacts against a way of

explaining practices which posits purely cognitive reasons as warrants underlying the social activity of the subject. Horkheimer observes that he “dared look behind the cloak of lofty ideas and made it his task to trace back individual as well as social habits to primitive biological drives.”²⁹

Horkheimer thus frames the significance of Freud in terms of his account of principles of explanation for social activity. Explanations offered by “lofty ideas” give a cognitive account of the meaning of the whole which justifies the habits of a subject to the subject. For Freud, however, intelligible concepts of the whole do not serve as a sufficient explanation for the significance of a social activity. Rather, he formulates a set of concepts that express a relation between the embodiment of subjects and their social activity, which is able to explain the alienation and dissatisfaction which subjects experience in their social life in a way not open to purely cognitive explanations. Thus, “The conflict of ... drives with the prevailing framework of civilization served him as the principle of explanation” in marked contrast to “not a few of the religious and philosophical entities which people like to offer as their motives.”³⁰ Freud, notes Horkheimer, thus critiques all purely “intellectual superstructures” and “metaphysical hiding places of the mind,”³¹ insofar as they elide a relation between embodiment and sociality in their attempts to explain the significance of a subject’s experience of its practices to the subject in question.

Freud’s attention to the disjunction between the embodied desire of the subject and her social practices is thus at the heart of Horkheimer’s appreciation of him. While psychoanalysts, he notes, are often tempted to abide by a strict causal nexus between a self-enclosed account of an antecedent personality-disorder and the consequent shape

²⁹ Horkheimer, “Ernst Simmel and Freudian Philosophy,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 29 (1948): 110.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

reality has taken for a subject (i.e. they “derive the physical from the psychological”), Freud begins with what lies at the obscured intersection between embodiment and existing social practices. The purpose of psychology is thus to understand the biological and instinctual reasons why a particular subject experiences alienation as it inhabits a social form of life.

Freud’s approach was that of a materialist psychology. Where Victorian ideology talked about the sublimity of love and proved callous to the suffering brought about by underlying instincts, Freud spoke about erogenous zones and used a physiological terminology. His tendency to derive the highest values from material processes, to resolve the psychological into the physiological and even physical, is almost overlooked in the eagerness to derive the physical from the psychological. This latter tendency, which forms one part in Freud’s work, has much less materialistic, critical implications, and therefore less detrimental consequences for prevailing ideologies. Where Freud spoke of ‘Lebensnot’. i.e. of very material conditions as the basic cause of certain psychological conflicts, we are tempted to abide by ego-weakness and other derivative complexes which are more easily accessible.³²

One must insist on an analysis of the embodied subject, Horkheimer holds (termed alternately the “material,” “physical,” or “physiological” aspect of subjectivity) if one is to offer an explanation for the alienation arising from a social practice, and psychology provides a necessary analysis of the relation between the subject’s embodiment and its sociality.

It is tempting in reading this striking affirmation, as well as Horkheimer’s unabashed support for “the theoretical core of Freud’s work, his biological materialism” as well as his call “to stick to Freudian orthodoxy,”³³ to interpret Horkheimer as simply regressing to the very kind of illicit immediacy which he is so critical of in earlier essays, by treating mediated social practices as ephemeral expressions of a basic biological essence. This way of understanding his argument, however, mistakes his attempt to contrast Freudian analysis with metaphysics as forms of explanation for the alienation of the subject. In studying Victorian patterns of explanation, Horkheimer notes, Freud refused to take

³² Ibid., 111.

³³ Ibid.

Victorian appeals to the idea of sacrificial “love” at face value as a sufficient justification for the suffering of subjects, and instead inquired into the relation between human embodiment and socially normative sexual practices. Freud’s descriptive judgment regarding “*Lebensnot*” or the “material conditions” underlying “psychological conflicts” was an attempt to inquire into the concrete embodied antecedent of the mediated expressions of alienation already offered by agents regarding the social practices they inhabited. His psychological analysis is thus not being praised here because it confirms philosophical intuitions regarding a biological immediacy underlying all social relations. Rather, it is being praised because it exemplifies a method of research into the intersection of biology and sociality: it offers a description of irrational states that explains them as arising from the way embodied subjects come to experience repressive social practices. Horkheimer thus describes psychology in the essay as a practice which seeks to understand and explain embodiment, for the purpose of subjecting alienation to the rational self-reflection of the subject,

While they [Freud and Simmel] made the irrational their subject-matter, they remained rationalists in the best sense of the word. They believed that the spell of the irrational is due to the inward and outward repression, and that this spell would be broken if it became truly and fully conscious; they aimed at overcoming rationalizations by consequent rationality.³⁴

When Freud or his followers treat psychological “disorder” as something other than a symptom arising from the intersection of instinctual and biological needs and socially repressive practices, when they invert this by claiming that the physiological is symptomatic of (universal, thus a-historical) psychological types – an approach which indeed makes up “one part in Freud’s work” – they are, according to Horkheimer, inverting a proper form of inquiry. Much better than such crass psychologism, he notes,

³⁴ Ibid., 112. Earlier, Horkheimer notes similarly of Simmel, “It was his credo ‘that there is no other source of knowledge ... but the intellectual processing of carefully verified observation, in fact what is called *Research*, and that no knowledge can be obtained from revelation, intuition, or inspiration’” (110).

is Freud's attempt to give a materialist account of the instincts and drives of embodied subjects. In context, this is not because this materialism reflects a metaphysical anthropology of some kind, but rather because it treats psychological states as symptoms of a breakdown in social relations that can be further researched and understood through a practice of inquiry. It offers a part of an explanation for why concrete historical practices have become problematic for the subjects who do them, instead of conflating the psychological states themselves as explanations for practices, or relying on a purely intellectual explanation that attempts a justification for such a state (like the Victorian construal of "love").

2.2. Alienation and Sociality: Sociology and Critique

The suffering arising from a subject's relation to its practices cannot simply be understood by focusing on the embodied desires and drives of the subject, but must offer an account of:

- (2): The various kinds of social practices which the subject engages in together with others, and which satisfy to a greater or lesser degree its embodied needs.

Horkheimer understands the study of various practices as well as the institutions which sustain them, as the provenance of sociology.

In an essay entitled "The Lessons of Fascism" (1950), in which Horkheimer details the importance of sociological analysis for understanding the rise of fascist states, he attempts to display the methodological relation of sociological research to the practice of psychology. Echoing the critique of psychologism to which he alludes briefly in his essay on Freud, Horkheimer begins by noting that when the object of contemporary psychology, the psyche of the individual, is understood not as a symptomatic expression of a *relation* between subjects and existing social life but rather as the exclusive *cause* of

such life, psychology becomes a form of modern Stoicism. It focuses on training the analysand to master her inward “affective impulses” and this mastery is consequently equated with the control of the subject over her external reality. Thus with the origination of modern psychology in the 17th century,

The theorist taught the individual self-consciousness and self-control so that he might gain an inward freedom while the realities of the external world kept him restrained and relatively unfree. In the tragedy of *Corneille*, the hero’s mastery over himself is identified with his mastery of reality, while in Molière man’s dependence on his emotions and feelings, his “blind spots,” are the essence of the comical.³⁵

Instead of interpreting affective states as reactions arising from the intersection of embodied drives and social relations in society, thus as symptomatic of the need for changes in social practices, subjects were taught to reflexively retrain their affect and desires in order to accept the social practices they inhabited. Yet the object psychotherapy treats, Horkheimer notes, is not primarily weaknesses *in* subjects that need to be better regulated or controlled, such as a chemical or mental imbalance. Rather, it should give expression to a *symptom*, expressing a relation of dissatisfaction between subjects and the social practices they inhabit.

Similar to its progenitor, contemporary psychological description may also treat its objects of reflection not as symptoms of a relation between subjects and problematic social practices but rather as states “inherent” to individual subjects which cause such practices,

The idea, tacitly rather than explicitly put forth in most cases, that psychological therapy is itself an adequate solution of social problems is hardly valid. Behind that idea rests the basic hypothesis that the mass of people, the individuals as they are determined by their inherent psychological mechanisms, are the active effective agents who create international misunderstandings and ultimately wars.³⁶

³⁵ Horkheimer, “The Lessons of Fascism,” in *Tensions that Cause War*, ed. Hadley Cantril (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950), 210.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

The falsity of this approach may be demonstrated empirically, Horkheimer thinks, “for we have before us the concrete experience of the fascist states.”³⁷ He proceeds to argue at length that fascism arose not as “the immediate expression of the circumstances and thinking of the common man,” i.e. as a result of what he terms an “inherent” condition moving German subjects towards collective action, but rather because of “economic and political configurations that followed their own intrinsic laws” quite apart from the self-conscious decisions of many of the subjects participating in them.³⁸ Social and economic practices acclimated the population to manipulation; manipulation was not made possible due to an “internal” shared psychosis (exclusively imputable, say, to discrete agents *qua* German).

Thus psychological descriptions should not be taken to refer to a trait inherent in subjects, but rather to relations formed between embodied subjects and the social practices they inhabit. Yet if understood as symptomatic of such relations, the products of psychological evaluation should not themselves be discounted, “To say that psychology cannot solve social problems by itself,” Horkheimer asserts, “is not to say that it cannot make a contribution.” Rather, when such descriptions “are placed within their proper setting, they assume very real significance.”³⁹ Psychological inquiry is thus integral to theory, so long as the subject’s expression of its needs and desires is situated in relation to the particular social practices which facilitate or hinder them. It is thus the goal of the sociologist to give an explanation of how the subject’s experience of its embodiment is mediated by its social form of life.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. For Horkheimer’s detailed empirical argument, note 218-223.

³⁹ Ibid., 226-227.

For Horkheimer, understanding the significance of psychological explanations aright thus requires a detailed understanding of the way the “internal” life of the subject is reflective of the place they inhabit in social relations,

Various strata of modern society not only carry different weights in the historical dynamic, they also reveal qualitative differences in the character and personality structure of their individual members. These differences become obliterated in the sweeping generalizations about aggressive instincts and their control, but they remain very real in society itself. If they are neglected, we run the danger of replacing in our minds the real human beings in their world of conflicts by a fictitious type, a kind of universal man, or even the “neurotic personality” of our time.⁴⁰

While, in his essay on Freud, Horkheimer supports the attempt to inductively understand how instinct and desire relate to the way a historical subject experiences its practices, in this essay he critiques explicitly the idea that one can begin analytically with something like a vague concept of “internal” aggressive instincts as such. Such an approach will inevitably produce a “universal” or “fictitious” construction, for to describe an aggressive neurosis is to refer to the way an embodied proclivity is mediated by a particular set of socio-historical practices. One may still posit a psychological explanation for a subject’s aggressiveness or passive alienation; however, this must always be done in relation to a particular context of inquiry, as an attempt to explain why subjects inhabiting this social form of life have come to mediate instinctual drives in such a way, *not*, that is, as an excuse to look away from a concrete context of inquiry into a more speculative philosophical anthropology. For the researcher, sociological description necessarily situates the use of psychological categories. The way this relates to Horkheimer’s invocation of universals like “self-preservation” in his late work is worthy of careful consideration.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 215. Horkheimer makes this argument repeatedly, e.g. 227, 240.

When an ineluctably embodied aspect to human practices is postulated, one inevitably becomes involved in offering sets of descriptions about what it means for humans to be biological animals. Such descriptions are universal in scope, inasmuch as they purport to describe certain families of traits which humans *qua* embodied organisms share. For instance, a scientist can attempt an explanation of a set of biological processes common to humans in various social forms of life: all humans undergo birth and death. This, of course, does not deny that the categories and explanations rely on a particular socially conditioned context of inquiry. It is only to say that they make claims which are universal in scope. The concepts used by psychology may be described in a similar sense. Psychology, as a science concerned with how social practices affect embodied organisms, requires accounts of humans as embodied and not merely social beings in order to generate an explanation of certain states of alienation that arise from the way the subject's embodied needs are mediated by social practices.

Yet despite the universal scope of such concepts, the way Horkheimer proposes to use them is not totalizing, for as he notes they are not appealed to in order to give a "universal" description of the necessary forms of human social practices. Human ways of mediating embodiment are diffuse and contingent on an infinite variety of particular social practices. Rather, such universal concepts facilitate an expression of why these embodied subjects have come to experience a particular social practice in the way that they have in terms of their embodiment. "Totalizing" concepts related, for instance, to instinctual self-preservation may thus be used to analyze more carefully a particular social relation as experienced by an embodied subject, not in order to abstract from the contingency and sociality of such mediation, but to better understand the way the embodiment of subjects is mediated by it. This does not deny the historical contingency

or fallibility of such universal concepts, nor is it intended to abstract from concrete social relations; rather, it intends to explain how embodiment relates to sociality.

The implications of this for understanding Horkheimer's theorizing are crucial. If one wants to critique a concept like "self-preservation" as "totalizing" in Horkheimer's theorizing because it is universal in the sense just noted, Horkheimer would not recognize this objection as compelling. For such universal concepts are necessarily entailed in the study of the kind of object a psychologist inquires into. But if one wants to argue that such concepts are "totalizing" because of the explanatory weight they carry for Horkheimer, i.e. if one wants to make the claim that they are used by him to circumvent the analysis of particular social practices in favor of a speculative philosophical anthropology, he would surely protest. He would likely counter that one can deploy universal descriptive categories without using them in a way that deflects attention from an analysis of a particular social practice (and, indeed, that one cannot but use such universal categories if the intersection between human embodiment and a social practice is the object of inquiry). Not distinguishing between ways universal concepts may be deployed in a context of inquiry is a significant lacuna in interpretive scholarship on Horkheimer. We will have reason to revisit it in our explanation of the concrete use of the concept "self-preservation" in Horkheimer's analysis of late capitalist society.⁴¹

2.3. Alienation and Truth: Philosophy and Critique

Neither of the objects of study we have examined, embodied "drives" for psychology or "social practices" for sociology, may be understood by the researcher, Horkheimer thinks, unless placed in relation. Embodied drives cannot be experienced,

⁴¹ For a further discussion of this, note my consideration of "self-preservation" in chapter 3, section 3.3.

let alone satisfied, except in terms of the social practices a subject is already doing. There is no suffering and desire as such, only the suffering and desiring a particular subject experiences in relation to a socio-historical practice she inhabits. Social practices, on the other hand, are always practices for embodied subjects. This is why subjects often experience alienation from a practice as a physical or psychological happening.

Any attempt to understand one or the other aspect of a social practice without recognizing the way they mediate and condition one another is thus a form of reductionism. Such reductionism spells the end of the possibility of critical inquiry. For Horkheimer one never gets to the “bottom” of either of these aspects of a practice: any purported grasp of a drive-in-itself has mistaken its social mediation; any description of the subject as merely societal mistakes that a social practice is inhabited by an embodied agent. As we have seen, Horkheimer does not think the theorist needs to postulate regarding a “bottom” to license critical inferences. What she needs, rather, is a thorough grasp of how subjects reflexively relate to the practices they inhabit. The two sciences we have outlined provide materials for such critical inferences.

Yet how to relate the findings of these sciences is a question that exceeds the analytic practice of either. The question is synthetic: a particular research problem in a concrete context of inquiry precedes and facilitates the theoretical activity of relating the various sciences. Various descriptions of a practice, if related well, allow a description of the subject’s relation to its practice that might serve as the basis for a diagnosis regarding a subject’s alienation and a hypothesis regarding how the practice might be altered to satisfy the subject.

In order to understand Horkheimer’s account of this synthetic task and how this relates to the practice of critical research, one must first clarify his understanding of the

relation of the specialized sciences to thought about “truth.” Horkheimer outlines this succinctly in a reflection towards the end of “Art and Mass Culture” (1941), an essay contemporaneous with his reflections in the “Notes,”

What is to be deplored is not that scientific thought has replaced dogmatism, but rather that such thought, still prescientific in the literal sense, is always confined within the limits of various specialized disciplines. It is wrong to rely on science so long as the formation of its problems is conditioned by an obsolete division into disciplines. Economy of thought and technique alone do not exhaust the meaning of science, which is also will to truth. The way toward overcoming positivistic thinking does not lie in a regressive revision of science, but in driving this will to truth further until it conflicts with present reality. Illuminating insights are not to be found in high and eternal principles, with which everybody agrees anyway (who does not profess faith in freedom and justice!), or in the routine arrangement of facts into customary patterns.⁴²

Horkheimer presumes that the scientific method has replaced appeals to the self-evident authority of tradition as a means of justifying claims about reality in modern life, and he is careful to note that his critique of the practice of the sciences is not a call for a return to such pre-modern conceptions of authority. Rather, he frames his work as a repair of modern scientific practice: he is disturbed that modern “thought” is “confined within the limits” of the various specialized branches of the sciences. Each discipline, he notes, has its own particular “problems” into which it intends to inquire as well as its own particular “technique” for developing descriptions related to these problems. For instance, Freudian psychology is concerned to understand the effect of the socially sanctioned mediation of instincts on the psychic states of subjects. Alienation as it is experienced by the individual is essentially the “problem” it seeks to address. And Freudian psychoanalysis has its own “technique” for investigating and describing such states of alienation. None of this is itself problematic, Horkheimer implies, nor should we revert back “behind” the practice of such sciences to pre-modern descriptions of psychic states.

⁴² Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture,” in *Critical Theory*, 285-286.

But Horkheimer is disturbed when such circumscribed investigations and the descriptions they generate are understood as the only concern of the sciences. So too, he notes, is the “will to truth.” Yet the analytic practices of the various sciences do not judge the “truth” of a practice. They can generate descriptions of particular aspects of a social relation, not make a judgment about how such aspects relate to each other in the life of a historical subject (thus, he notes, they are “pre-scientific”).⁴³ As a result, it is not clear how they may inform practical judgment about how a subject should act in relation to the practices she inhabits. One should, Horkheimer concludes, neither abandon the results of the analytic sciences by returning to metaphysical postulates, “high and eternal principles,” as the justification for critical claims, nor conflate the arrangement of facts “into customary patterns” (i.e. descriptions generated “within the limits of various specialized disciplines”). Rather one must somehow “drive” science further in order to generate “illuminating insights.”

While this passage does not offer an account of Horkheimer’s alternative to the two patterns of thought he critiques, the regression to metaphysical postulates and the conflation of specialized description with reality, it nevertheless illustrates clearly that:

- (1): The methodological space Horkheimer articulates would involve a synthetic task which incorporates the findings of the various special sciences, and
- (2): The synthetic task would relate the products of the analytic sciences in a way that would “illumine” social practices, or allow a subject to understand better her relation to the practices she inhabits, though how this is so is not specified in the passage.

⁴³ Horkheimer draws explicitly here on Hegel’s notion of dialectics as the culmination of the scientific endeavor. Dubiel’s explanation of Hegel’s terminology on this point is illuminating: *Theory and Politics*, 143.

Horkheimer is not interested in this passage in an abstract critique of the sciences. Rather, he wishes to claim that the various analytic sciences need to be related synthetically in terms of the critical task.

This synthetic task is the work of the philosopher. In a telling reflection on Freud's relationship to the philosophical task, Horkheimer begins with the restatement of a premise we have already examined: Freud refuses to accept intelligible concepts as explanations for states of embodied alienation. Yet this refusal to accept such explanations of alienation itself embodies a kind of philosophical commitment,

Freud's negative attitude against philosophical illusions is itself an expression of his unique approach to the decisive problems of life, an approach of the kind we may call philosophy. Only we must understand the term philosophy in an unconventional way, free from connotations of an idealization of the gruesome realities of our world. In contrast to such dubious teleological efforts of humanity there have always been other meanings of philosophy.⁴⁴

Freud's posture towards the transfiguration of suffering, notes Horkheimer, should in no sense be conflated with an abstract negation of intelligible concepts as such. For Freud shares with other *Aufklärers* a basic commitment to the ideas of reason, and it is on the basis of this commitment that he proceeds with his critique, "Science indeed was to replace metaphysics, but science as a philosophical force. It should do away with metaphysical illusions such as prejudices and superstitions, but should carry over the basic concepts of rationality: truth, freedom, and justice."⁴⁵

Some have wished to interpret passages such as this as straight-forward affirmations of a rationalism which understands truth as the adequation between social practices and intuitively known concepts of reason. For instance, Löwy notes

It seems that the ultimate foundation for values and the ultimate guarantee for the truth of Critical Theory is reason, as understood by the Enlightenment and by German idealism. ... Horkheimer seems to be more reserved [than Marcuse] and some of his essays contain substantial criticisms of classical rationalism; but even

⁴⁴ Horkheimer, "Ernst Simmel," 110.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

there he explicitly claims that the reason (*Vernunft*) of Critical Theory is the inheritor of this rationalist tradition.⁴⁶

Yet if “truth” were a set of ratios between practices and self-evident intelligible concepts, the idea that one would need to question already existing “dubious teleological efforts” with the results of research, a basic premise of the essays we have just examined, would be nonsensical. As Horkheimer outlines in his approbation of Freud, the psychologist begins with an account of suffering, whose principle of explanation is some form of metaphysics, a transfiguring “rationalization.” Instead of accepting this, the psychologist inquires into the instinctual and social preconditions that have given rise to this expression, in order to render a judgment about what “suffering” signifies in terms of the fit between the instincts and desires of the embodied subject and the socio-historical practices she inhabits. Thus both the ideological content of rationalizations as well as the alternative fit which the *Aufklärer* seeks are themselves empirical discoveries. In affirming the relation of this scientific endeavor to the ideas of reason informing the Enlightenment, Horkheimer draws on a trope he developed earlier in his “Postscript” to “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937). In arguing that critical theory was the true inheritor of emancipatory Enlightenment ideals like truth, freedom and justice, he distinguished the shape this commitment had taken from the notion that these concepts were present for subjects as “pure” intuitions, “The dialectic theory does not practice any criticism based solely on ideas. Even in its idealist form it had rejected the notion of a good-in-itself wholly set over against reality. It does not judge by what is beyond time

⁴⁶ Michael Löwy, “Partisan Truth: Knowledge and Social Classes in Critical Theory,” in *Foundations of the Frankfurt School of Social Research*, eds. Judith Marcus and Zoltán Tar (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 300. For a rehearsal of interpreters that make this claim, note my description of stage (3) in the Introduction.

but by what is within time.”⁴⁷ Further, he had presented the idea that the content of such concepts – the standard to be adequated – was itself an immanent socio-historical judgment made by theorists, “Reason’s intuition of itself, regarded by philosophy in former times as the highest degree of happiness, is transformed in modern philosophy into the materialist concept of a free, self-determining society.”⁴⁸ Thus Horkheimer presumes that the ratio held forth in the Enlightenment ideals between the present state of a practice and the fulfillment of the expectations of a subject regarding it is in fact a historical ratio, which must be discovered in the face of social and political obstacles. This truth is no less an ‘objective’ fit for subjects in society, however, for being historical. Thus paralleling his discussion of the “will to truth” in “Art and Mass Society,” Horkheimer notes that Freud holds forth “the idea that there is something like objective truth, and that the ills of human existence are ultimately due to the perversions and deflections of that truth under the impact of taboos and other mental and extra-mental forms of coercion.”⁴⁹

It does not follow from this that Horkheimer’s account of Enlightenment philosophy as a synthesizing discipline does not involve intelligible concepts, only that the justification of the truth of such concepts radically shifts from the coordinates of adequation as they are understood by the rationalist, and become contingent instead on historical investigation mediated by the contingent projects of subjects in a context of inquiry. Demonstrating this is enough to repair Löwy’s claim that the embrace of intelligible concepts like a “free, self-determining society” or the “will to truth”

⁴⁷ Horkheimer, “Postscript,” 250. For Horkheimer’s claim that critical theory is the inheritor of the Enlightenment, note the “Postscript” to “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory* 243-244; cf. “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics” (1937), in *Critical Theory*, 148-149.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 248

⁴⁹ Horkheimer, “Ernst Simmel,” 112.

contradict Horkheimer's critique of rationalism offered elsewhere. There is no contradiction in asserting both that:

(1): The justification of intelligible concepts is never self-evident, so that such abstract concepts may be thrown into question by the experience of suffering in a way that requires inquiry (in this case, the adequacy of such concepts to explain the subject's experience of alienation is at issue);

(2): Intelligible concepts themselves are unavoidable in such contexts of inquiry (in this case, the notion that the self-realization of the subject is a historical goal that ought be pursued is supposed by inquiry into alienation). Such concepts, as we will see in the following chapters, are never self-evident for Horkheimer, they are rather situated as mediated expressions of historical traditions.

Put in terms of Horkheimer's reflections, there is no contradiction between the claim that philosophy questions teleological justifications of alienation and seeks, in structuring the various practices of the sciences in relation to a discrete problem, to describe and repair the experience of alienation, and the claim that philosophy itself assumes teleological concepts like the goal of "self-determination" or "the will to truth" in this endeavor, concretely delineated in terms of particular historical contexts. If inquiry begins in the middle of a set of commitments that are never merely descriptions of empirical states, we need not be surprised when Horkheimer claims both that one should utilize research in the sciences instead of explaining suffering by appeal to intelligible concepts and that the inquiry in which such research is utilized itself supposes a commitment to certain intelligible concepts. This does not indicate inconsistency, only that the object of his critique is not teleological concepts as such.

In his reflections on Freud as a philosopher, Horkheimer summarizes and distinguishes two related commitments defining critical philosophical activity, which we may use to illustrate the relation of the philosopher to the specialized sciences,

Philosophy means the ability to have new and genuine experiences, the power to overcome the hypnotic spell of current ideologies, to resist the deadening effects of daily routines on our organs of perception, and to open new horizons in our understanding of nature and humanity. Both elements, the passion for truth and the capacity to raise the human mind [to] new levels (of understanding rather than of domination) are parts of the definition of philosophy.⁵⁰

The philosopher, first, questions the immediacy of contemporary reality, i.e., “the deadening effects of daily routines on our organs of perception.” This supposes a commitment to interpret the results of the analytic sciences in a way that enables the subject to reflexively understand its own alienation. It thus presumes a situation in which alienation is experienced as an irritant but not understood, and commits itself to synthesizing the results of the sciences in order to bring about the self-conscious understanding of the subject. In so doing, it has “the capacity to raise the human mind [to] new levels of understanding” and the ability to reveal “new and genuine experiences.” We may summarize this in terms we have outlined previously in this chapter by noting that the philosopher:

(1): Synthesizes psychological and sociological analyses of the experience of the subject in order to illumine a subject’s own alienated relationship to its social practices.

The second commitment of the philosopher situates this concern for inquiry into alienation in relation to a refusal to accept existing justifications for such alienation, i.e. “the hypnotic spell of current ideologies.” One may well be committed to utilizing research to explain states of alienation, yet be directed in synthesizing the results of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 110. I amend Horkheimer’s English for purposes of clarity.

research by the supposition that such states are inevitable or necessary. The critical philosopher, by contrast, is animated in her synthesizing activity by the belief that the alienation arising from a social relation is unnecessary and its justification vacuous. In this context, to say that philosophy exemplifies a “passion for truth” over against the obfuscations of ideology is not to say it is committed to descriptive correspondence in some abstract sense that ideology is not, but rather to indicate that it is committed to the Enlightenment ideal of the self-satisfaction of the subject as an end-in-itself. The philosopher therefore:

(2): Synthesizes judgments regarding historical relations in a way that privileges the Enlightenment idea that the self-realization of the subject is a desirable historical possibility.

Thus the inquiry of the critical philosopher both critiques certain uses of intelligible concepts and yet relies, in a distinct sense, on an intelligible concept of self-determination which orients the ends sought by her inquiry. This concept of self-determination itself is justified by Horkheimer vis-à-vis an argument which depends upon a philosophy of history. For our purposes, a discussion of this may wait until chapter 4.

Having described Horkheimer’s understanding of critique as a practice of inquiry, I shall devote the remaining chapters to understanding how this is exemplified by his late critique of instrumental reason. In the next chapter we will note the way he uses empirical research to analyze the object of his inquiry, the relation of changes in modern political economy to altered habits of reasoning. We will then note the way he orients the findings of empirical practices in terms of a specific problem he wishes to diagnose (chapter 4), before turning to his suggestion for the therapeutic repair of this problem (chapters 5-6).

Chapter 3

State capitalism, the family and the social preconditions of reasoning: The genesis of instrumental reasoning

I noted in chapter 2 that Horkheimer's mature theorizing is often presented as a disappointed reaction to trauma, a shift away from his former concern with empirical study towards a speculative philosophy. The particulars of Horkheimer's account of political economy in the 40s are typically presented accordingly as a way-station on the road to a negative philosophy of history. For instance, in an influential interpretation we shall examine below, Helmut Dubiel concludes that the theory of state capitalism, developed by Horkheimer in his essay "The Authoritarian State" (1940), and supposed by him throughout the 40s, provided him "with an economic justification for considering an economic analysis of society no longer necessary or even possible."¹ If in the previous chapter, I outlined Horkheimer's development of his early conception of the relation of empirical research to social critique, in this chapter I will use this analysis to return to Horkheimer's various essays on political economy and the family with new eyes. I shall argue that Horkheimer understood his late "turn" away from Marxist categories not as a shift away from empirical and towards speculative concepts, but rather as an attempt to reformulate his original categories of analysis in the face of qualitative changes to their object of study. I shall also illustrate that the shape of this late study follows precisely his mature reflections on research methodology.

In the previous chapter, I noted that a basic axiom of this methodology is the "pervasiveness hypothesis." The hypothesis claims that the relationship between the dominate practices characterizing a social whole and the life of the individual can be uncovered by an examination of the micrological facets of the individual's life.

¹ Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, trans. Benjamin Gregg (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1985), 81. We shall examine the broader passage from which this excerpt is taken below.

Following his analysis of the logic of this relation, Horkheimer focuses his mature research on two *loci*: a pervasive practice of political economy which shapes the social whole (analyzed in his essays on “state capitalism”) and an intimate aspect of the individual’s life which reflects this pervasive practice (analyzed in his essays on “authority in the family”). Although, as we shall see, the two are typically treated separately in the literature, I shall illustrate that his reflections on both *loci* should be read together as an attempt to describe this two-sided relation between part and whole, specified as the impact of changes in the practice of economic competition on the way agents learn how to reason within the family. In section 1, I begin by examining Horkheimer’s “shift” away from Marxist categories as a response to the empirical inadequacies which characterized his early understanding of the practice of competition. In section 2, I turn to the other side of this relation, his description of the impact of changes in political economy on the social practices of the family.

This chapter addresses a constructive challenge to two distinct audiences, critical theorists who have focused their reading on Horkheimer’s essays on political economy, and feminists who have analyzed his essays on the family. I shall briefly note what is at stake for both. Critical theorists take for granted as axiomatic that the theory of Horkheimer and Adorno in the 40s supposes a “totalizing” premise, the notion that reasoning as such has openly become what it always secretly was: an instrument of domination in the service of self-preservation.² Horkheimer, it is true, is concerned in

² In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1996), 112, Habermas famously argues that Horkheimer and Adorno’s “totalizing” critique of reason as a tool “in the service of self-preservation gone wild” renders any rational critique of social domination impossible. This interpretation is often rehearsed: Jacob Klapwijk, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Critical Theory and the Messianic Light* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2010), 18, 56; John O’Neill and Thomas Uebel, “Horkheimer and Neurath: Restarting a Disrupted Debate,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (April 2004): 92; Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy: From Kant to Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 229, 235, 238-239; Ben Morgan, “The Project of the Frankfurt School,” *Telos* no. 119 (Spring 2001): 97; Marianna Papastephanou, “Ulysses’ Reason, Nobody’s Fault: Reason, Subjectivity and the Critique of Enlightenment,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26, no. 6 (November 2000):

his reflections on political economy and the family to demonstrate the way the subject's socially learned patterns of reasoning are altered by qualitative changes in the social whole. Yet I shall demonstrate, first, that a careful reading of these essays illustrates that he does not wish to construe this qualitative change simply as the truncation of reason to an instrument of self-preservation. Rather, his account of the way the subject learns to reason within the family distinguishes between the theoretical and reflective faculties of reason, which he portrays as having distinct ends and which he maintains are affected in distinct if related ways due to changes in the practice of competition characterizing late modern life. Further, I shall demonstrate that he does not attempt to critique every theoretical use of reason in the pursuit of self preservation. Rather he distinguishes between ways of exercising the faculty which are suited to the modern goal of self-determination, and ways which are not. In describing Horkheimer's empirical studies, my goal is thus to fundamentally reorient the way the object of his late reflections is understood, with a view to retrieving the significance of his philosophy for contemporary critical theorists.

55; Anthony J. Cascardi, *Consequences of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 24; Hauke Brunkhorst, "Dialectical Positivism of Happiness: Horkheimer's Materialist Deconstruction of Philosophy," trans. Jean Keller and John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, eds. Seyla Benhabib et. al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 81, 86; Georg Lohmann "The Failure of Self Realization," trans. Kenneth Baynes and John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer*, 388; Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, trans. Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 37-38 and "Critical Theory," trans. John Farrell, in *Social Theory Today*, eds. Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 360; Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1991), 60-63; John Grumley, *History and Totality: Radical Historicism from Hegel to Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 177-178; Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 168; Dubiel, *Theory and Politics*, 89-90; Herman Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany, 1831-1933*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 65; Paul Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 71; Paul Piccone, general introduction to *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (repr. 1982; New York: Continuum, 1998), xviii; Andrew Arato, introduction to part I of *Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 24.

I will also dialogue in section 2 with feminist interlocutors who deny that Horkheimer's conclusions regarding the family can be defended by contemporary theorists in a form that is not repressive. They offer three critiques:

(1): Horkheimer portrays women's non-instrumental concern for the family as a passive expression of feminine ontology, neither chosen nor retained in accordance with the active judgment of the woman, but possessed naturally and lost through machinations outside of her control. Thus Horkheimer does not recognize the constitutive subjectivity of women.³

(2): Horkheimer does not appreciate that the entrance of women into the marketplace allowed their escape from oppressive and violent relations of dependency within the home. He does not consider the violence enforced by such relations of dependency as an object worthy of reflection.⁴

(3): Horkheimer affirms patriarchal authority as a *sine qua non* of the internalization of values as ends-in-themselves. He thus fails to recognize the thoroughly instrumental character of the internalization process itself.⁵

Each of these critiques express a weakness of Horkheimer's analysis that arises from his conflation of sociality with biology, a conflation which these authors rightly note must be repaired by any theorist who intends to recover the significance of his empirical

³ Mechthild Rumpf, "Mystical Aura: Imagination and Reality of the 'Maternal' in Horkheimer's Writings," trans. Jean Keller and John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer*, argues that there is an "undetermined distinction between prehistorical inheritance and socialization" in Horkheimer's work on the family (310). In particular, "The figures of maternal love that [Horkheimer] outlines ... follow the logic of a linear cultural pessimism; they miss the reality of woman as an empirical 'subject'" (317). Cf. Patricia J. Mills analysis in *Woman, Nature and Psyche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 111.

⁴ Patricia J. Mills notes in *Woman, Nature and Psyche*, "[Horkheimer's] concern with woman as mother, as she represents another reality to her son, overrides any concern with woman qua woman" (120-121). She concludes, "There is no account of how [the son's] dream was often a nightmare for woman who lived by, for, and through others" (121). Cf. Rumpf, "Mystical Aura," 320.

⁵ Jessica Benjamin notes in "Authority and the Family Revisited: or, A World without Fathers?" *New German Critique*, no. 13 (Winter 1978): 53, that while "there may be real value in Horkheimer's assumption that the female principle of nurturance is reduced by the instrumentalization of motherhood," nevertheless, "his explanation for this encroachment ... does not seem viable" because he traces it to "the weakness of the father rather than to the breakup of kin-group ties and other networks, especially among women."

studies. Several passages in his late work show a limited recognition of how this conflation confuses social analysis. I shall thus use these texts at the end of 2.1 in order to point toward one way theorists interested in retrieving the central premises of Horkheimer's reflection on the formation of reasoning practices may do so in a more defensible form. It is also true, as (2) notes, that aspects of Horkheimer's thought are simply indefensible. For instance, the lack of a sustained critique of the domestic dependency relationship in his reflections in the 60s and 70s is unacceptable for any theorist concerned with recovering the Enlightenment goal of the self-determination of the subject.

Yet the arguments employed miss important nuances in Horkheimer's analyses. My reconstruction of Horkheimer's understanding of the relationship between maternal nurture and reflective reasoning will illustrate, for instance, that a portrayal of the active subjectivity of women in the midst of unjustified relationships of dependency is integral to his reflections on the family in the 30s and 40s (contra 1). Further, I will argue that he did not equate his analysis of the entrance of women into the marketplace with the justification of past relations of dependency, but rather believed that he could feasibly critique both. While the recognition and critique of such dependency is indeed eclipsed in the last two decades of his life, I will demonstrate that this is a marked shift from his earlier arguments in the 30s and 40s, which may be jettisoned without thereby losing the cogency of this analysis (contra 2). Finally, I shall argue that the idea that Horkheimer conceived of the instrumental internalization of patriarchal authority as preserving a domain of "substantive" values misunderstands the central premises he wishes to advance in his late essays regarding patriarchal authority (contra 3). Thus my

engagement with this latter set of interlocutors involves a qualified defense of Horkheimer's work on the family.⁶

1. Marxist political economy and the comprehension of "transitional" states

1.1. "Transitional States" and the diagnostic limits of Marx's political economy

Despite his nuanced emphasis on social psychology, Horkheimer understands economic practices as the engine of societal development in his early essays and construes politics as an ephemeral reflection of the economy.⁷ As early as 1937 in his "Postscript" to "Traditional and Critical Theory," however, he notes of critical theory that "the dependency of politics on the economy has been its object, not its program."⁸ Marx's theorizing does not address transitional states-of-affairs arising from the fulfillment of its own predictions: changes in the most basic economic practices of a society such as its "property relations," "increased productivity" or even preliminary changes in the political sphere such as increased "social collaboration" cannot be naively conflated with the leap into freedom without an analysis of "the nature and development of the society in which all these particular developments are taking place."⁹ Even something as central to Horkheimer's theorizing as the dependency of politics on the economy is thus not axiomatic. In a time of transition between historical stages, the focus of theory may shift as this object of its reflection changes fundamentally. Just as concrete historical events influence him to revisit the problematic concept of "class

⁶ This "work on the family" is not monolithic. In his essays from the 30s, Horkheimer predicts the sublation of the relations in the family in a more adequate and universal form with the advent of socialism: "Authority and the Family" (1936), in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et. al. (New York: Continuum, 1999), 117, 124. In his later essays, and particularly "Authoritarianism and the Family Today," in *The Family: Its Function and Destiny*, ed. R.N. Anshem (New York: Harper, 1949), he continues to emphasize the relations of solidarity constituting the traditional family, yet no longer couches this in terms of a coming fulfillment but rather their steady erosion. Nevertheless, parallels between his early and later works are evident. We will draw upon his earlier essays as they illumine this later discussion.

⁷ For instance, note Max Horkheimer, "History and Psychology" (1932), in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995), 117-118 and "Authority and the Family," 49-51.

⁸ Horkheimer, "Postscript" (1937), in *Critical Theory*, 251.

⁹ Ibid., 250.

consciousness” using the tools of social psychology in his earlier essays, so his analysis in “Postscript” does not signify a movement away from economic analysis, but is an attempt to properly comprehend the changing character of the economy as a part of an empirical whole in which “the transition remains indeterminate.”¹⁰ What is at issue is not a shift in analysis from one kind of practice (the economic) to another (the political), but rather an attempt to better comprehend an interrelated set of social practices that is in transition. This stands in fundamental continuity with Marx, for “even in its most refined estimates” Marx’s *Capital* did not reify anonymous economic practices as self-contained but focused on “the historical course of society as a whole.”¹¹ Yet, Horkheimer asserts with equal vigor, “None of these elements is separable from the economic.”¹²

In a development of this argument in “Authoritarian State,” Horkheimer thus asserts that both a scholastic appreciation of Marx’s theory as an object of historical significance to be appreciated (like a beautiful painting one might observe, not a tool for action), as well as a repetition that rehearses the “laws” articulated by Marx as a- historical depictions of the future (as tools for action immediately fitted to the present apart from historical reflection), detach theory from the contemporary development of its object. There are necessary limits to Marx’s original theory which are rooted in his greatest strength, the dependence of his reflection on a contingent, historical object,

Part of the meaning of theory is the time at which it is developed. The theory of the growth of the means of production, and of the task of the proletariat is neither a historical painting to be gazed upon nor a scientific formula for calculating future events. ... If truth is perceived as property, it becomes its opposite and hence subject to relativism which draws its critical elements from the same ideal of certainty as absolute philosophy.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 249.

¹¹ Ibid., 247.

¹² Ibid., 250.

¹³ Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State,” trans. Elliot Eisenberg, in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 106.

Marx formulated historically dependent postulates which may continue to illumine the present shape of society, yet as fallible historical articulations, adequate to the historical social form to which they were addressed but in need of reevaluation and repair in the face of its development.

Formulating the concrete implications of such methodological openness in the “Jews and Europe” (1939), Horkheimer thus notes, “The categories of political economy – exchange of equivalents, concentration, centralization, falling rate of profit, and so on – still have tangible validity, except that their consequence, the end of political economy has been attained.”¹⁴ This acknowledges that Marx provided diagnostic tools which accurately predicted the way economic functions would become centralized in the regulatory power of the state. Yet in noting that “the end of political economy has been attained,” Horkheimer haltingly admits that the theoretical tools Marx provided for predicting this centralization do not continue to be adequate to interpret the subsequent institutional practices emerging from it.¹⁵

Similarly, in “Authoritarian State,” Horkheimer notes that, for Marx, the crises leading to the collapse of capitalism are “defined by the market economy.”¹⁶ The assumption of continual competition between individual entrepreneurs thus framed Marx’s analysis of both the laws precipitating crises as well as the solidarity of alienated workers. However, the practice of competition assumed by Marx as a given has in fact changed qualitatively. A different “social structure,” together with “particular

¹⁴ Horkheimer, “The Jews and Europe,” trans. Mark Ritter, in *Critical Theory and Society: a Reader*, eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), 83. Cf. “Authoritarian State”, 95, “The historical predictions about the fate of bourgeois society have been confirmed. ... The El Dorado of bourgeois existence, the sphere of circulation is being liquidated.”

¹⁵ I am indebted to Peter Stirk for this interpretive point: *Max Horkheimer: A New Interpretation* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 96.

¹⁶ Horkheimer, “Authoritarian State,” 96-97.

tendencies” unique to it, now supports the productive metabolism of society.¹⁷ A new constellation of social practices characterizing institutions caught in “the transition from monopoly to state capitalism” thus requires renewed examination.¹⁸ This is particularly the case, if, instead of transfiguring transitional states as necessary precursors of some leap into freedom, the possibility is allowed that they may continue indefinitely.¹⁹ As we will see, for Horkheimer, “state capitalism” as a concept delineates institutional *Tendenzen* characterizing “transitional” states in a way that intends to repair limits in Marx’s political economy, not to replace such empirical concepts with speculative ones.

1.2. “State capitalism” as a reparative concept

To comprehend the importance of “state capitalism” in Horkheimer’s late theory, one must begin with its original formulation by Horkheimer’s confidant and *Institut* economist, Franz Pollock. Horkheimer’s claim that a new pattern in the relation between economic and political practices is emerging with “the transition from monopoly to state capitalism” depends on Pollock’s analysis.²⁰ In his essay, “State Capitalism” (1941), Pollock concludes, “The replacement of the economic means by political means as the last guarantee for the reproduction of economic life changes the character of the whole historic period. It signifies the transition from a predominately economic to an essentially political era.”²¹ This formulation is notably imprecise, as the word “economic” is used in two distinct ways. Pollock speaks of “economic” means being replaced by “political” means, before noting that both of these means are related to “the reproduction of economic life.” Thus he distinguishes narrow economic *means*

¹⁷ Ibid. 97.

¹⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁹ Ibid., 97.

²⁰ For a description of Horkheimer’s relationship to Pollock, note Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 60, 106-108.

²¹ Friedrich Pollock, “State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations,” in *Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 78.

(the mediating practices of the market), from economic *life* in a broader sense (the metabolism existing between human productive practices and nature).

Dubiel concludes on the basis of such passages,

Adorno and Horkheimer found in Pollock's theory the political-economic refinement of their own thesis (a refinement they themselves never accomplished), namely, that domination in highly developed, industrial societies no longer assumes an economic form, as in liberalism, but rather an immediately political form, as in the pre-bourgeois era. Pollock's theory provided them with an economic justification for considering an economic analysis of society no longer necessary or even possible.²²

This conclusion understands the definition of "economic" in the narrow sense Pollock outlines (economic *means*), and infers from the way such means are construed that Horkheimer entirely abandons an economic analysis of society. But this is not the way Horkheimer would have characterized his own understanding of "state capitalism" in his essays on political economy. While Horkheimer concedes in his earlier "Postscript" that, in transitional states, political mediations will gain a new "independence" from market mechanisms (thus making a claim regarding "economic" means in the narrow sense), at the same time he carefully qualifies that "none of these elements is separable from the economic" (thus making a claim regarding "economic" life in the broader sense). Both Pollock and Horkheimer thus use "state capitalism" to refer to a qualified empirical claim: the historical shape of narrow "economic" mechanisms is changing and this has implications for the broader productive metabolism of society. This, it may be noted, is by no means a shift away from a concern with economic practices in either the narrow or broader senses. It is precisely Horkheimer's attention to the concrete empirical realities of transitional states that challenges his attachment to Marxian political economy and motivates such changes in his theorizing.

²² Dubiel, *Theory and Politics*, 81.

Much ink has been spilt about the debate that took place between Pollock and the other main economist at the *Institut*, Franz Neumann, regarding Pollock's formulation of "state capitalism."²³ Rather than rehearsing the details of the discussion, a task that has been done and redone elsewhere, I wish to fix attention on one particularly salient moment in the debate, in which Horkheimer clarifies how he intends to use Pollock's concept to guide his own theorizing. What is so instructive about this moment is that Horkheimer refuses to understand the concept as simply descriptive of present states of affairs, in the way both Pollock and Neumann assume. Rather, he proposes it as a testable hypothesis regarding the tendencies of institutions in transitional states that may direct future research into the qualitative way the experiences of economic practices are changing for subjects. In other words, he interprets it as a way of repairing the limited diagnostic capacity of his former Marxian political economy.

The essential point of dispute between Neumann and Pollock is whether a qualitative shift in the shape of political economy is occurring under the Nazi regime. They agree that the sign of such a shift will be when functions which had once been directed by liberal markets, such as:

- (1): The production of goods,
- (2): The contracting of labor for hire by businesses,
- (3): The variation of prices on the basis of supply and demand, and
- (4): The appropriation of profit by private owners,

become directed by state regulation controlled by ruling political cliques. There is also agreement between the two that regulation had indeed taken over the place formerly held by market mechanisms in (1)-(3). They differ fundamentally, however, in how they

²³ For instance, Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*, 280-291; Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 66-76; Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, 152-158, 161-167.

understood (4). Neumann stresses the continuing role of private profits as an incentive for large businesses to control the regulatory power of the state, and notes that the private appropriation of profit has not been outlawed. For his part, Pollock emphasizes that while private appropriation is still allowed, how the appropriated value is generated is almost entirely circumscribed by the interests of the cliques controlling state regulation.²⁴ The closeness in proximity of the two positions illustrates that the question at stake for both is one of descriptive emphasis.²⁵

Horkheimer, however, refuses to treat the discussion as a disagreement regarding competing descriptions and construes the work of both theorists according to his interest in understanding the future shape of transitional states. While he concedes that Neumann's thesis is a (superior) description of existing practices in fascist Germany, he privileges Pollock's work as an ideal type intended to allow theorists to project the direction which these developments will take. Horkheimer thus writes to Neumann,

As I have boundless confidence in your research on economic processes in Germany, I do believe your statement that Germany is not in a situation remotely resembling that of state capitalism. On the other hand, I cannot free myself from Engels's view that society is moving towards precisely that. I must therefore assume that the approach of such a period very probably still threatens us. And this seems to me to a great extent to prove the value of Pollock's construct in providing a basis for discussions of a topical problem, in spite of all its deficiencies.²⁶

Pollock's analysis thus presents, for Horkheimer, not simply a description but a diagnosis, the rudiments of a hypothesis for explaining developments in contemporary political and economic practices. The concept of "state capitalism" does not answer the question of whether "profit"/"wages" (e.g. 4) still exist as an empirical motive for

²⁴ Pollock, "State Capitalism," 76.

²⁵ This summary of the dispute draws particularly on Peter Uwe Hohendahl's historical analysis, "Critical Theory and the Challenge of Totalitarianism," *Telos*, no. 135 (Summer 2006): 16-17. On the closeness of Neumann and Pollock's formulations, note Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 288-291 and Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, 67. The former claims Neumann's critique of Pollock may be reduced to "quibbles about words" (288).

²⁶ Letter from Horkheimer to Neumann, 2 August 1941, quoted in Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*, 285.

economic agents. Rather, it offers a hypothesis regarding tendencies in societies transitioning from monopoly capitalism to state capitalism, tendencies which will qualitatively alter the significance of “profits” for subjects in the future.

We noted at the outset that critical research studies the detrimental impact of a “pervasive” practice characterizing the social whole on the embodied life of subjects. We are now in a position to note the pervasive practice Horkheimer wishes to examine, using the category of “state capitalism”: competition. “State capitalism” explains the changing significance of economic mechanisms (Pollock’s economic *means*, e.g. profit/wages) for subjects inhabiting “transitional” states, in relation to the evolution of the basic “unit” of competition which constitutes the building blocks of political economy in such states (e.g. the constitutive element of Pollock’s economic *life* of society). The continuing existence of wages and the profit motive are thus not denied per se by Horkheimer. Rather, he maintains that the significance of such mechanisms for subjects is qualitatively changing due to transformations in the practice of competition characterizing the social whole.

1.3. Competition and economic agency in “state capitalism”

Horkheimer argues that while competition for profit continues to exist in late modern society, the basic unit of competition has qualitatively changed. For instance, workers no longer compete in authoritarian states for the opportunity to earn a wage. What once counted as the goal of progressive movements, free and full employment, has, in fact, been nominally accomplished. Yet in the process, what full employment signifies for workers has also changed fundamentally. The ability of the worker to participate in the economic life of society is now dependent, not upon employment and the fluctuation of market cycles, but upon her identification with the party leader or clique, who ensures employment. “With the abolition of unemployment the isolation of

human beings has not been broken. Fear of unemployment is supplanted by fear of the state.”²⁷ While “wages,” “profit,” and “competition” between various factions certainly continue as aspects of the metabolism of the life of society under fascism, their meaning for subjects is fundamentally altered. The suffering meted out blindly by the business cycles of an erratic economy has been replaced by conscious and deliberate forms of targeting, “Previously, the economic fate was not only anonymous, it also took aim at the sinners and the elect without regard to human particularities; To that extent it was humane in its inhumanity. In the Führer-state, those who are to live and those who are to die are deliberately designated.”²⁸ In the fascist state, what was once understood as an irrational and arbitrary fate, in retrospect appears humane.

Yet, lest one think this “qualitative” shift is simply concomitant with authoritarian governance, Horkheimer notes that the relation between worker and clique found under fascism is prefigured in the relationship between labor and industrial organizations, on the one hand, and the state, on the other, in the Weimar republic,

The call to unite in trade unions and parties was carried out to the letter, but these organizations carried out not so much the unnatural tasks of the united proletariat, namely the resistance to class society in general, as that of submitting to the natural conditions of their own development into mass organizations. ...

... Monopolized industry ... pushes the masses of workers into supporting passivity. They have more to expect from the protection and assistance of the organizations than from their work.²⁹

The support of corporate organizations (whether in the form of unions or corporations), including adaptation to their organizational culture and obeisance to their commands, marked the difference between success and failure for the economic subject in Weimar. Market cycles and their effect on the individual recede in importance for the worker, replaced by an interest in secure membership in such organizations. In this

²⁷ Horkheimer, “Jews and Europe,” 86.

²⁸ Ibid., 90.

²⁹ Horkheimer, “Authoritarian State,” 97-98.

particular regard, subjects of both fascist and democratic states face a structurally similar situation: they depend for their self-preservation on the political constellations to which they belong. These organizations themselves are the primary agents of competition, whose object is to influence the movements of the economy through the control of regulatory practices.

It has often been noted that, in their analysis of the parallels between democratic and authoritarian forms of “state capitalism,” Horkheimer and Adorno downplay and misunderstand the significance of liberal procedural rights, as well as the tradition of public deliberation reflected in, for instance, American pragmatism, as these impact historical efforts to resist fascism.³⁰ One may (and Horkheimer in his later work indeed does³¹) come to appreciate this significance without thereby denying the poignancy of a commonality which these reflections on state capitalism suggest. This commonality has to do with the way subjects reason reflexively about their participation in the economic life of society. Whatever other significant institutional and cultural differences between democratic and authoritarian forms of state capitalism obtain, the self-reflective reasoning of the subject in either form has undergone a change arising from a qualitative shift in the unit of competition that characterizes both. This commonality, Horkheimer argues, can be usefully contrasted to the self-understanding of subjects in previous historical moments.

Thus in the preface to an issue of *Studies in Philosophy and the Social Sciences* devoted to “State Capitalism” (1941), Horkheimer notes that in the early liberal period the middle class was populated by economic agents who each accumulated capital for their

³⁰ For instance: Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, 74 (cf. 63, 65) and Abromeit, “Dialectic of Bourgeois Society,” 243-246, 481-482.

³¹ For instance, note Horkheimer’s reflection on Rosa Luxemburg’s famous statement, “The remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure,” in his “Preface” (1968) to *Critical Theory*, vii.

individual endeavors. Competition between such agents was conducted on the basis of their common assent to formal legal rules binding the practices of exchange. This marked a striking decentralization when compared to late medieval institutions,

During the nineteenth century private industry consisted of numerous individual entrepreneurs who in each country competed with likewise independent traders and bankers for social power. The outcome of this struggle expressed itself in the relative size of the capital controlled by each of them. Dominion over men and things was distributed among the members of this diversified social group according to the rules of exchange. Power had become decentralized; it had been transferred from relatively well-organized privileged bodies to the multitude of proprietors who possessed no other title than their wealth and their resolve to use it. The course of social production was the resultant of their respective business policies. Seigniorial ordinances were replaced by anonymous laws and autonomous institutions, by economic, legal, and political mechanisms which reflected the size and composition of the nation's industry.³²

Early modern competition allowed a kind of limited autonomy and self-direction for such individuals, evidenced both by the form of competition ("success" was not determined by secure membership in corporate bodies but centered rather on the activities of individual agents), as well as its object (the goal of competition was amassing surplus value not changing regulatory rules or otherwise pulling the reins of a planned economy). This economic practice thus stands in marked distinction, Horkheimer notes, from late medieval practices of production in which "relatively well-organized privileged bodies" regulated the metabolism of society through "seigniorial ordinances." Thus, in an initial attempt to theorize the contemporary transition in political economy, he draws a historical parallel between past forms of production and the contemporary form "state" capitalism is coming to take.

Horkheimer recognizes, of course, that he is making a distinction of degree. He has no wish to idealize the freedom afforded by early liberalism and recognizes that the "autonomy" afforded by market practices had been qualified on all sides by economic

³² Horkheimer, "Preface," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 2 (1941): 195.

realities outside the control of the individual agent.³³ Indeed, he notes, workers outside the middle class were not even afforded the minimal autonomy of the entrepreneur: they had only their labor to sell and the terms of exchange for this sale were out of their control.³⁴ Nonetheless, a distinction may be drawn, he thinks, between the activity and goal of competition for members of the middle class in earlier and later forms of capitalism.

This difference in competition profoundly impacts the way subjects reason. In early modern life the character of the successful “bourgeois” individual is marked by the need for independent judgment regarding economic and social realities, as well as foresight related to the future well-being of himself and his family. Contrasting what he terms the “passivity” characterizing individuals in the Weimar Republic to the earlier bourgeoisie, Horkheimer thus notes in “The End of Reason” (1942),

Fifty years ago psychological experience, skillful argumentation, foresight in business were still instruments of progress in society. ...

...The liberty which the market offered to the producers, consumers, and their multifold intermediaries, although it may have been abstract and deceptive, had at least permitted a certain range of deliberation.³⁵

Weimar’s late bourgeoisie were no longer concerned with this kind of deliberation, “Only the already well-established section of the bourgeoisie is still really interested in the market.”³⁶ The elective independence of the middle class individual had been eclipsed (as anachronistic) by identification with and response to the dictates of powerful and encompassing collectivities. Thus subservience to the dictates of the leaders of the union and party, including the support of their values, practices, and various ideological slogans, becomes more decisive in the economic life of the subject

³³ Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” 80.

³⁴ Ibid., 83-86.

³⁵ Horkheimer, “The End of Reason,” in *Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 38-39.

³⁶ Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State,” 97.

than independent judgment and reflection on the vicissitudes of the market had once been.

The presupposition of this distinction between the early and late bourgeoisie is the continuing existence of the possibility for gainful employment, the personal appropriation of profit, and even entrance into the middle class as an ideal. Though the *Schein* of profit accumulation remains, the *Wesen* of market practices, the way they reflect and constitute the life of the social whole, as well as the corresponding self-understanding and reasoning practices of subjects experiencing that whole, is altered. Or as Horkheimer puts it succinctly, “competition assumed a different form” and “the transition affected culture as a whole.”³⁷ Organizations such as the party, the union, and the corporation have become competing “subjects” in the altered economy and the goal of such competition centers on the control of the instruments of planning and the technical use of such to forward the particular interest of the competing group. The preservation of the individual rests not on “independent” judgment or entrepreneurial activity vis-à-vis the cycles of the market but on her identification with such organisms.

Far from signaling an excuse to retreat from empirical analysis, Horkheimer’s work in the 40s thus signals an initial attempt to theorize regarding the subtleties of transitional states. He remains convinced in his late writing that the form and object of competition has changed decisively, and that this has significant implications for understanding the reasoning habits of subjects. Perhaps the most decisive evidence for this is a late lecture he gives evaluating the contemporary significance of Marx, in which he returns to the central questions informing his appropriation of “state capitalism” in the 40s. Telescoping the argument we have just outlined, Horkheimer notes in “Marx Today” (1968) that at the outset of the liberal period, the economic success or failure of

³⁷ Horkheimer, “Preface,” 195.

the individual was mediated directly by success in “the struggle of competition,” “In the age of liberalism, the bourgeois understood economic progress to be the result of the competition of businessmen, manufacturers, and contractors of all kinds. Efficiency in the struggle of competition was supposed to determine one’s fate.”³⁸ Along with other bourgeois theorists, Marx assumed the individual as the self-interested unit of such competition. Capitalists as well as workers are united as classes, according to him, because of the common interests individuals shared as a result of the productive process. Thus the “concept of class preserves the concept of the individual, without making it thematic.”³⁹ Marx predicted, of course, that the forming of classes would eventually lead to a situation where capital would become centralized. Yet he conceived of the motor driving this centralization as competition between individual members of the bourgeois class. However,

In the twentieth century this centralization, this concentration of capital has prospered to the point that individual management is no longer characteristic for the major branches of trade and industry. Corporations, no matter how much internal rivalry they may have, are directed by committees and boards. Where a firm was once led by an owner who directed it quite arbitrarily for himself, his own name, his family, and heirs, the people and things he preferred, it is now controlled by directives that result from various external interests and tendencies.⁴⁰

If Marx was right in forecasting the radical centralization of capital, his prediction that this centralization would lead, first, to increasing misery, then to a leap into freedom, is based on a false premise: it supposes that competition will continue in an identical form as the centralization of capital progresses. Marx thus continued to model competition in terms of the calculations of individual economic agents, even while theorizing about situations in which this kind of calculation would have been made obsolete by the concentration of capital. Instead of assuming that a change in the form of the economic

³⁸ Horkheimer, “Marx Today—An Address,” trans. Karl Ameriks, in *Postwar German Culture: An Anthology*, eds. Charles E. McClelland and Steven P. Scher (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), 132.

³⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 132.

“unit” engaged in competition (from the individual entrepreneur, say, to the multinational firm) would change the calculus of agents regarding their self-interested participation in economic life, Marx assumes the rationality characterizing competition between individuals as a constant in his equations, and then projects that this will lead to crises.

This supposes that competition and economic agency are a-historical. As Horkheimer notes, “With the economically determined restructuring that Marx called the centralization of capital, the essence of competition changes. Quantity suddenly becomes quality.”⁴¹ The centralization of capital thus changes both the historical unit of competition as well as the reasoning of agents participating in economic life. Individuals who once constituted the “proletariat” class do not remain the same as the economy centralizes: their self-interest changes as the subject of economic competition becomes collectives. Instead of a monolithic class rebelling against the way the economic process shapes society, Horkheimer notes, the economic process “determines the essence and function of the individual as well as of society.” He continues, “Competition has passed from individuals to groups of various sizes, which now function as subjects in the economy. Employees and workers are also united in associations for economic and political action, which tend to follow the leadership of their staffs just as large corporations do.”⁴² In continuity with earlier essays we have investigated, Horkheimer notes that instead of rebelling, workers adapt in order to fit into the demands of various powerful organizations.⁴³ Whereas the character of the early bourgeois was marked by self-reflective independence and “relative” autonomy, and *had* to be marked by such

⁴¹ Ibid. Note similar formulations in three essays from *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell et. al. (New York: Seabury Press, 1974): Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer Today” (1961), 103; “Threats to Freedom” (1965), 152, 156-157; “The Future of Marriage” (1966), 93.

⁴² Ibid., 132-133.

⁴³ Ibid., 133.

qualities in order for the entrepreneur to compete successfully, the “late” bourgeois individual is passive and acquiescent in relation to the collectivity which represents its economic interests. Consequently, any sharp distinction between the two classes must be questioned, “The inner logic of history points not merely to the abolition of class distinctions, but also of the differences between individuals who have been defined by the collective.”⁴⁴

If “the essence and function” of the individual shifts in adaptation to collectives that have become the new agents of competition, to continue to maintain the idea that competition will usher a leap into freedom is itself a form of idealism that mistakes the way the historical substance of concepts like “subject” and “competition” have changed and hypostatizes them apart from empirical analysis.⁴⁵ It should thus be evident that to portray Horkheimer’s turn away from Marx as a turn away from empirical analysis towards speculative concepts actually inverts the reasons he offers for accepting the theory of state capitalism. The essays we have just examined are not exercises in philosophical anthropology but rather trace the development of historical forms of competition. In particular they describe the impact of this change on the reasoning habits of agents, a change Horkheimer will attempt to analyze in his micrological analysis of the family-unit.

⁴⁴ Horkheimer, “*Pessimismus Heute*” (1971), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen, 1949-1973*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, vol. 7 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Tauschenbush, 1985), 230.

⁴⁵ As Horkheimer himself notes explicitly: “The Three Mistakes of Marx” (1957-1958), in *Dawn and Decline: Notes, 1926-1931 & 1950-1969*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 157-158.

2. The family and learned habits of reasoning

2.1. Horkheimer's understanding of the faculties of theoretical and reflective reasoning

2.1.1. The relation between the faculties

As I already noted in the introduction to the chapter, Horkheimer understands the family as a reflection of the social whole in miniature as well as the context in which a subject first internalizes habits of reasoning. In his essays on the family, he thus describes how patterns of reasoning learned within the home inform the subsequent reasoning habits of subjects as they participate in the life of the whole, as well as the inverse of this relation, the way such habits are themselves influenced by (and reflect) changes in this whole.

His account of changing patterns of reasoning begins with a description of how the justification of social relations occurs within the family. There are two related patterns of inference, Horkheimer notes, that a subject may utilize to judge whether the authority presumed by a social relation in the family is justified. One may take a relation to be justified because:

(1): It ensures an extrinsic goal the subject happens to desire, like biological self-preservation. For instance, submission by a child to an (asymmetrical) relationship with a parent might be understood as rational inasmuch as it enables her physical protection or economic security. Horkheimer correlates this with a form of theoretical (or instrumental) judgment.

(2): It ensures the continuation of a relation desired for its own sake. Thus a child may obey a parent because she takes pleasure in the relationship sustained by this fidelity and desires to reciprocate the parent's love for her. Horkheimer identifies this with a form of reflective (or aesthetic) judgment.

Before discussing Horkheimer's analysis of how these related forms of reasoning are practiced within the family, it is necessary to carefully situate this analysis in relation to his theoretical attempts to distinguish and relate theoretical and reflective reasoning elsewhere. Indeed, although his essays on the family are not routinely linked to his reflections on the faculties of reason, they suppose and cannot be properly understood apart from them.

In a passage concluding "The End of Reason," Horkheimer makes an initial, halting attempt at the task of distinguishing (1) and (2),

The age-old definition of reason in terms of self-preservation already implied the curtailment of reason itself. The propositions of idealistic philosophy that reason distinguishes man from the animal ... contain the truth that through reason man frees himself of the fetters of nature. This liberation, however, does not entitle man to dominate nature (as the philosophers held) but to comprehend it. ... Reason has born a true relation not only to one's own existence, but to living as such; this function of transcending self-preservation is concomitant with self-preservation, with obeying and adapting to objective ends. ... As the faculty of calling things by their name, reason is more than the alienated life that preserves itself.⁴⁶

The idea that reason analyzes relations in terms of how they function for the purposes of a subject's self-preservation depends, Horkheimer notes, on a conception of an end which is pursued for its own sake. In the case of instrumental reason, the end in view is biological preservation. Yet this is but one end a subject may pursue among others.

Horkheimer puts this awkwardly, noting that the "function of transcending self-preservation is concomitant with self-preservation, with obeying and adapting to objective ends." A clearer way of stating this would be to note that both "self-preservation" as well as judgments which purport to "transcend" it are "concomitant" inasmuch as they are related species of a broader genus: both are judgments that depend on teleological ends. In the former case, what is judged is how well a subject's relation to an object serves the extrinsic end of its biological preservation; in the latter, what is

⁴⁶ Horkheimer, "End of Reason," 47.

judged is the intrinsic satisfaction a subject experiences in relating to an object for its own sake.

The various ends pursued by reason are always mutually related. As we will discuss later, Horkheimer is adamant that there is no pursuit of biological preservation as such, any more than one may discern human “nature” apart from its cultural mediations. The instrumental understanding of objects in relation to the self-preservation of the subject is thus always mediated in relation to other social ends that the subject privileges as desirable in-themselves. Inversely, the subject’s continuing willingness to identify with social ends-in-themselves may not be abstracted from the subject’s embodied experience of its own needs and desires. The embrace of a relation or experience as in-itself worthwhile assumes it is worthwhile for *this* embodied subject in terms of its self-awareness of its own biological and psychological needs (the most important one of which, for Horkheimer, is self-preservation). A mutually constitutive relation thus exists between both judgments because both are forms of activity for a social embodied subject.

Though inextricably related, the two kinds of judgment may be distinguished by their ends. Reflective reasoning focuses on what qualitatively distinguishes a particular sensuous experience from others as a privileged end-in-itself for a subject. It names the value of an experience of a subject-object relation for the subject experiencing it, instead of the way this relation affects other extrinsic purposes for the subject. The concepts this kind of judgment forms of an experience intend to distinguish the experience as uniquely desirable, much like a proper “name” distinguishes *this* sensuous individual

from others.⁴⁷ Reflective reason is thus a faculty which “calls things by their name” in an attempt to “comprehend” an object in its sensuous specificity.

By contrast, in the case of instrumental judgment, an experience is described in relation to a unifying function which may be used to analyze all other experiences (no matter how differentiated they may otherwise be). This latter kind of reasoning does not distinguish a particular experience from others, but rather relates a multiplicity of experiences to a single function. Following the Kantian terminology familiar to Horkheimer, we may note that in the former case reason is exercised as a *receptive* faculty which intends to distinguish what he will term an “emphatic” experience of sensuous particularity, whereas in the latter case, it is a *determining* faculty, which relates an experience to others by highlighting the commonality they share which is useful for a particular function, such as self-preservation.⁴⁸

To illustrate the mutual relation of the two forms of judgment as well as their logical distinction, Horkheimer elsewhere uses the example of lovers,

The lover loves the beloved as he sees her, and this expresses his own personality and history as it does those of the society to which he belongs. What seems good to him in the beloved also denotes his own idea of the good and of the world as it should be. But his conception of the good is also affected by the beloved. There are people who can offer no resistance here and quickly adopt the qualities of their partner. Experience in the emphatic sense is the productive, reflective process of the assimilation of the new that lights up in the other.⁴⁹

On the one hand, the relation of the lover to the beloved reflects historical concepts regarding the beautiful and the good which the lover holds in common with others who participate in her society. These shared concepts are used by the lover to relate her

⁴⁷ For the contrast between “proper names” and the classification characteristic of theoretical judgment, I draw on J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chapter 6, section 2, especially 277.

⁴⁸ In the excurses on Sade’s *Juliette* in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944), trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 68, Horkheimer and Adorno thus treat Kant’s account of theoretical judgment as synonymous with the practice of “instrumental” reason in the pursuit of self preservation.

⁴⁹ Horkheimer, “Love and Experience” (1957-1958), in *Dawn and Decline*, 145.

experience of the beloved to already existing patterns of living, informed as these are by her concern for various functions that are extrinsic to the particular relationship itself: her place in society and her secure advancement, her aversion to certain kinds of pain and her desire for certain kinds of pleasure as ends that the relationship might serve (etc.). All of these functions are, in turn, related to her embodied self-interest and thus may themselves be subsumed under the most basic function determining instrumental reasoning, self-preservation. The lover cannot rescind from the determining use of concepts in reasoning because they constitute what it means for the lover to be an embodied subject with a social history. The experience of the particular beloved thus occurs for the lover in terms of such already taken for granted functions.

On the other hand, however, the experience of the uniqueness of the sensuous particularity of the beloved is indeed part of what constitutes “love,” and this provides an example not merely of the subsumption of the particular in terms of already existing formations of functions, but of a “reflective” relation to an object that recognizes the new “light up” in it, i.e., that which is not immediately subsumable using existing categories. It is in this sense that the lover loves the beloved not as an example of a rule but for his own sake. Every aspect of their relation, their unique embrace, their mutual pleasure in shared life-experiences and projects, etc., signals a mutual recognition of the particular sensuousness of the other that posits *this* one as irreplaceable rather than a function of another end. Horkheimer terms this experience in the “emphatic” sense. It may also be understood fruitfully as experience from the perspective of the neophyte: while such experience occurs in the midst of and even presupposes already existing

constellations of social relations, it recasts them in light of its emphatic qualitative particularity.⁵⁰

Two implications follow from this example. First, reflective judgment, much like theoretical judgment, has concrete social and material preconditions that affect the way it is exercised and its objects of concern, which change as social relations change. Thus while Horkheimer notes that reflective reason is indeed “the faculty of calling things by their name,” it is not able, he continues, “to keep aloof from history and to intuit the true order of things, as ontological ideologies contend.”⁵¹ That is, while it is a form of judgment about a sensuous particular relation experienced for its own sake, it is still a judgment made by a subject who has been constituted with others in society by her participation in a shared social form of life. In contrast to modern ontology, which conceives of a reflective judgment as a measurement of the intrinsic worth or beauty of a particular as measured by an intuitively experienced intelligible idea, Horkheimer claims that a reflective judgment signifies the intrinsic worth of a relation between a subject and an object as judged by a historically and socially situated subject. Horkheimer wishes to maintain that judgments regarding the intrinsic beauty or goodness of a state of affairs are ineluctable (without them no way of expressing qualitative uniqueness would be possible), yet he does not want to elide the relationship between such judgment and the particular historical subject having the emphatic experience.

Yet one may distinguish the form of each kind of judgment. Thus, second, although reflective judgment may not be abstracted from its socio-historical conditions, neither may it be equated with theoretical judgment, so that reason itself is reduced to a mere

⁵⁰ Cf. Bernstein’s description of the notion of the “neophyte” in Kant’s account of reflective judgment in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, e.g., 307-309, 314-315.

⁵¹ Horkheimer, “End of Reason,” 47.

faculty of subsumption. In a study that presages the argument of “End of Reason,” “The Relation Between Psychology and Sociology in the Work of Wilhelm Dilthey” (1939), Horkheimer thus notes that he correctly distinguishes between two kinds of rational judgments, judgments regarding “the relationship between cause and effect” (which we have termed the “determining” judgments of the theoretical faculty of reason), and judgments regarding the relationship “between external and internal, whole and part” (“receptive” judgments characterizing the reflective faculty).⁵² For Dilthey, Horkheimer continues, “The knowledge of ourselves has as its object not only the stream of perceptions as psychic reality appeared to Hume or Berkeley, but the structural whole, ‘*Strukturzusammenhang*.’”⁵³ In this recognition, notes Horkheimer, Dilthey “tried to overcome the sterility of experimental psychology which at his time had usurped the place of philosophy in European academic life” by presenting the idea “that our entire conscious and unconscious life could not be reduced to the, so to speak, blind, meaningless, qualitatively insufficient elements of traditional psychology.”⁵⁴

For Dilthey such intuitions of the meaning of the whole disclose that which is distinct from the causal nexus of appearances. Thus a scientific analysis of the causes of an experience of the whole commits a category mistake. But Horkheimer notes, in consonance with the second point just noted, that one may not infer from the distinction between kinds of judgment that reflective judgment is thereby opaque to empirical inquiry, as if it were based upon an “internal” intuition of the whole that might be distinguished from the empirical experience of particular conditions.

While criticizing the lag between our concrete knowledge of man and scientific psychology, [Dilthey] persisted in the latter’s unfounded belief that valid insight must confine itself to the realm of the immediately given—the “*données immédiates de*

⁵² Horkheimer, “The Relation Between Psychology and Sociology in the Work of Wilhelm Dilthey,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 8, no. 3 (1939): 434.

⁵³ Ibid., 436.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 437.

la conscience” which also play so vast a role in Bergson’s vitalism. His idea of “*Sinnzusammenhang*” is an attempt to determine, with insufficient means, the concrete being of man by a positivistic restriction to the “given,” to the “data” of his so-called inner life, whereas this concrete unity can be understood only by transcending those limits and conceiving man as a real element of a real world. ... [T]he individual can never be built out of the individual himself.⁵⁵

Dilthey was incorrect, notes Horkheimer, to reify experiences of the whole as reflections of the “so-called inner life” of subjects.⁵⁶ One should appreciate the distinction between the two kinds of judgment without thereby conflating their distinct form with distinct objects. Rather than merely reflecting this inner experience, participation in a historical form of life itself shapes both the subject’s experience and its interpretation of the whole. Judgments regarding the whole thus have a genetic relation to the social and historical practices subjects inhabit, including the social and economic practices whose study Dilthey assigned to the “sciences.” Emphatic experiences that have become codified in the social practices of a community as taken for granted ends can thus be tested precisely by their continued impact on the embodied and social states of sensuous subjects.

2.1.2. The faculties and empirical experience

For Horkheimer, we may summarize, the basis that theoretical and reflective forms of judgment appeal to in order to license an inference regarding the rationality of a social relation is the historically and socially qualified experience of the relation had by the individuals participating in it. Both kinds of rational inference thus involve a judgment about the fittedness of a social relation to this experience.

When Horkheimer turns to analyze the family, he thus begins by contrasting this way of understanding the rationality of a social relationship with a view that supposes

⁵⁵ Ibid., 437-438.

⁵⁶ In *ibid.*, 432-433, Horkheimer notes that for Dilthey the study of history and the other humanities illumines a prior inner intuition of the meaning of human life, yet it in no sense constitutes this meaning. It simply reflects the “inner life” of the subject back to itself.

that the rationality of the relation is based, not on a mediated judgment of the experience of the relationship, but on a natural or self-evident property of one member of the relationship. When authority within the family is taken by the child to be a natural quality possessed by the father, not an attribute of a social relation which might be judged as more or less justified in a practical or derived sense, then its justification is disconnected from the way that subordinates in the hierarchy (i.e. mother and child) experience the social relation.

In the consciousness of the present age, authority is not even a relationship but an inalienable property of the superior being, a qualitative difference. Just as the bourgeois outlook does not regard the value of the material or spiritual goods which men daily use as a form of social relations but withdraws it from rational analysis as being either a natural property of things, or on the contrary, as a purely arbitrary appraisal, so it likewise conceives of authority as a stable quality (provided it does not, in anarchist fashion, deny it entirely).⁵⁷

The result of this, Horkheimer will claim, is that a social relation is “withdrawn” from rational analysis and treated as if it were a fact of nature (or “reified”). By way of contrast, in his empirical studies, “Authority and the Family” (1936), and “Authoritarianism and the Family Today” (1949), Horkheimer attempts to judge the reasonableness of the relations in the family according to the experience of the subjects inhabiting them, in order to understand the way this prepares subjects in the family for judging other practices making up the social whole.

As we will see, Horkheimer is concerned that:

(1): The subject within the family no longer judges the value of ends-in-themselves in terms of its own embodied desire but rather conceives of them as immediately given apart from such experience (in the case of reflective judgment) (section 2.2);

⁵⁷ Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” 103. For similar formulations, note: 102-103, 122.

(2): The subject within the family no longer judges the deferral of its own gratification as instrumentally justified in relation to future ends it has taken as its own (in the case of theoretical judgment) (section 2.3).

Both of these concerns regard how a subject relates its rational reflection regarding ends to its own experience, either its experience of the sensuous embrace of a relation for its own sake in the case of (1) or its experience of the instrumental deferral of its desire for the sake of a future realization of other ends in the case of (2).

2.2. The maternal role and its changing relation to reflective judgment

2.2.1. The maternal role as a reaction to patriarchal relations of dependence

The early Enlightenment, Horkheimer notes, was a time when “the rights of the individual” were asserted against various claims to natural authority made by established institutions such as “feudal cliques, churches, and foreign potentates.” For the subject, he continues, “The past was symbolized by hierarchic forms; the future, in contrast, by the individual uniting with his equals.”⁵⁸ Thus Horkheimer understands early modernity as a time when authority was no longer treated as a quality inhering in natural institutions, but was rather understood as a social relation that could be judged as more or less reasonable by the individuals participating in the institution.⁵⁹

However, he continues, the history of how the public marketplace was freed from feudal authority is a history of freedom for bourgeois family units, not their individual members. Feudal justifications of authority, though put to rest in the marketplace, continued within the confines of the family,

The consequences of these historical events ... by no means affected all the forms of social bondage of the individual. ...

[T]he birth of modern civilization emancipated the bourgeois family rather than the individual per se and thus carried within itself a profound antagonism from the

⁵⁸ Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family,” 381.

⁵⁹ For earlier formulations of this philosophy of history, note Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality” (1933), in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 15, 20.

very beginning. The family remained essentially a feudal institution based on the principle of “blood” and thus was thoroughly irrational, whereas an industrial society (though itself including irrational elements in its very essence) proclaims rationality, the exclusive rule of the principle of calculability and of free exchange following nothing but supply and demand. The modern family owes its social significance as well as its inner difficulties to this inconsistency of society as a whole.⁶⁰

Subjects were increasingly able to challenge the claims of institutions regarding their own “natural” authority, yet inside the home the same claims to authority persisted in the subjection of woman and children to a “pseudofeudal, hierarchical structure” of “direct personal dependence.”⁶¹ The bourgeois family, this *contradictio in terminis*, thus marks a “profound antagonism” at the heart of modern life.

Horkheimer thus recognizes that the claim to freedom for the individual implicit in the philosophy of the early Enlightenment was encased on all sides by contradictions. While laborers were freed from feudal bonds of authority, their agency was circumscribed because the conditions under which they could “freely” contract labor were set in advance by the managers of the means of production.⁶² Within the bourgeois family, meanwhile, women and children remained in a social position analogous to feudal vassals. Freedom from heteronomous authority, to the extent it existed, was thus limited to the bourgeois father at the helm of a business or household economy.

In order to understand what Horkheimer intends by his claim regarding the subjection of women, it is helpful to examine an extended note he authored, which appears in the “Notes and Sketches” of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). In parallel with his later account in “Authoritarianism and the Family Today,” Horkheimer notes that in early modernity women did not have access to a commercial sphere freed from feudal

⁶⁰ Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family,” 381-382.

⁶¹ Ibid., 382.

⁶² Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” 86-87.

structures of authority. Domestic life was thoroughly shaped by this violent exclusion from public life, as a series of reactions to subjugation,

Woman gained admission to the world of mastery on behalf of the whole of exploited nature, but in a broken form. Subjugated, she mirrors her conquerors victory in her spontaneous submission, reflecting defeat back to him as devotion, despair as the beautiful soul, the violated heart as the loving breast. At the price of radical exclusion from praxis and withdrawal into a charmed circle, nature receives homage from the lord of creation. ... Through its masks it acquires the gift of speech; in its distortion it manifests its essence; beauty is the serpent which displays the wound where once the fang was implanted. Yet behind man's admiration for beauty lurks the always ringing laughter, the boundless scorn, the barbaric obscenity vented by potency on impotence, with which it numbs the secret fear that it is itself enslaved to impotence, to death, to nature.⁶³

Beauty, "spontaneous" submission and unconditional love are alike reactions that obscure their own genesis in oppressive dependency. Expressions of matriarchal otherness were thus distorted masks, reflections not of feminine ontology as such, but of the alienated suffering of the woman mediated by the social relations of dependency characterizing domestic life.

It is equally true, however, that this wounded maternal figure expressed a real protest against the dehumanizing effects of public life, not simply passive capitulation. There is a genuine sympathy and concern for the harsh conditions faced by the husband and son in the public marketplace. Foreshadowing his later note in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer thus argues in "Authority and the Family" both that the woman is reduced to "subpersonal" status in the home as either a "sexual object" or a "domestic servant," yet also that she expressed, "in sexual love and especially in maternal care" a desire for "the growth and happiness of the other," so that "a felt opposition therefore arises between them and the hostile reality outside."⁶⁴ A fragile relation thus exists between two aspects of the early modern's woman's reaction to

⁶³ Horkheimer and Adorno, "Man and Beast," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 207.

⁶⁴ Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 114. For other descriptions of this duality, note: 55-59, 105-106, 112-113, 114, 117-119.

oppression: it both expresses a genuine concern for the sensuous individual not as a “mere function” but as an end-in-itself,⁶⁵ as well as disclosing in the very form which this concern takes the woman’s forced dependency. Her expression of solidarity is genuine and yet inextricably marked by conditions of dependency (“defeat” is mirrored in her “devotion,” “despair” in her “beautiful soul,” the “violated heart” in “the loving breast”).

For Horkheimer, maternal concern does not therefore simply serve as a contradiction to the mores existing outside the family. The retreat away from the domination of the market offered to the husband by the woman itself exemplifies a previous, more direct, form of feudal oppression. The situation of the woman parallels the experience of the laborer: despite the fact that partners choose each other “freely” in the bourgeois marriage, the man (like the employer) holds economic and social power, while the woman’s “free” choice is dictated in reality by heteronomous conditions of dependency. Yet the activity of the woman is nevertheless portrayed by Horkheimer not merely as a form of quiescence, but as an act of solidarity.

Rumpf notes that passages such as the following (from Horkheimer’s earliest essay “Authority and the Family”) support the claim that, for Horkheimer, the basis of this solidarity is not the active agency of the woman but rather her ontological constitution,

To the extent that any principle besides that of subordination prevails in the modern family, the woman’s maternal and sisterly love is keeping alive a social principle dating from before historical antiquity, a principle which Hegel conceives ‘as the law of the ancient gods, “the gods of the underworld,”’ that is, of prehistory.⁶⁶

Rumpf concludes from this passage that, for Horkheimer, the maternal is a necessary trait of womanhood, “phylogenetically older than all conscious human laws.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 118.

⁶⁷ Rumpf, “Mystical Aura,” 324.

Yet it is important to notice that Horkheimer prefaces this statement by observing that the modern expression of the maternal reflects a *social* principle, which is testified to by Bachofen, Morgan, and Engel's anthropological theories regarding the existence of archaic matriarchal societies.⁶⁸ He further places this principle in contrast to an equally universal characterization of subsequent patriarchal social relations, which "introduced mankind to class conflict and to the rupture between public and familial life."⁶⁹ Ignoring the Manichean tendencies of this jejune history for the moment, I wish to simply register that Horkheimer conceives of the maternal and patriarchal not as mere reflections of biology, but as mediated social practices. Just as the instinctual responses of men are formed by patriarchal social relations and take on a distorted form due to the irrationality of the economic life of the whole, so too the woman is inhibited by the practices of the larger society,

Because it still fosters human relations which are determined by the woman, the present-day family ... contains an element of antiauthoritarianism. But it must also be recognized that because of her dependence woman herself has been changed. She is, in large measure, socially and legally under the authority of the male and is seen in relation to him, thus experiencing in her person the law that prevails in this anarchic society. In the process her own development is lastingly restricted.⁷⁰

Two conclusions are worth drawing from this. First, as we noted in the introduction to this chapter, one should indeed question Horkheimer's equation of the paternal and the maternal as mediations of male and female sexuality. On this, Rumpf is entirely correct. Nevertheless, second, neither can it be denied that he treats the "maternal" and "paternal" not merely as expressions of biology but as *social mediations*: his claim regards how the man and woman's instinct and embodiment are constrained or enabled socially. It is thus a mistake to infer from the fact that he wrongly construes the maternal social role exclusively as the mediation of feminine sexuality (or the paternal as exclusively

⁶⁸ Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 117-118.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 118.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 118-119.

male for that matter) that he understands the agency of either the woman or the man as “passive” or unchanging. The scope of “agency,” for Horkheimer, consists in how a subject learns to act upon its biological and instinctual need, and this can take a variety of forms either with or against the grain of societal norms.

Elsewhere in his later writing this nuance is made explicit. The contemporary expression of “maternal” concern as an unconditional love for the husband and child despite their economic utility is portrayed by Horkheimer as having its historical genesis not in the passive expression of feminine concern, but rather in the historically contingent “rebellion” of women against arranged marriages,

The appearance of love as a social rebellion is probably the result of the negation of discipline, the rebellion against the interests of the family, against an order of relationships which had taken on the glow of sanctity. As the exclusiveness of sexual surrender was no longer imposed from without but desired for the sake of the partner, sexuality was freed from a means-end nexus that had been transfigured as eternal custom.⁷¹

Maternal concern is thus portrayed by Horkheimer as a historically-mediated phenomenon that has its most immediate socio-historical antecedent in rebellious practices of infidelity, not in the natural faithfulness of the woman to husband and child. He presumes that the present shape of the maternal is similarly historically mediated, and that it is a reaction of solidarity to a situation of oppression which the woman did not choose. His interest is thus to situate the exercise of female subjectivity in relation to social conditions, and in so doing to avoid an account which would either deny the devastating effect of oppressive conditions of dependency on the woman or eclipse her agency in the activity of solidarity.

⁷¹ Horkheimer, “On the History of Sexuality” (1959-60), in *Dawn and Decline*, 191-192.

2.2.2. The maternal role and the faculty of reflective judgment

While the domestic sphere itself presupposes dehumanizing relations of subjugation, it is thus Horkheimer's contention that the maternal reaction to this state of affairs exhibits a way of responding which recognizes and values the sensuous particular subject. This response provides a set of experiences that offer a child the ability to reflect critically upon the conditions of subjugation that situate its own relationship to the mother. As Horkheimer notes in the essay "Art and Mass Culture" (1941),

If it is true that family life has at all times reflected the baseness of public life ... it is also true that it has produced the forces to resist these. The experiences and images which gave inner direction to the life of every individual could not be acquired outside. They flash forth when the child hung on his mother's smile, showed off in front of his father, or rebelled against him, when he felt someone shared his experiences—in brief, they were fostered by that cozy and snug warmth which was indispensable for the development of the human being.⁷²

Nascent in this passage is Horkheimer's attempt to describe a relation in which the child as a subject is recognized not simply as a function but as an end-in-itself.⁷³ The justification of the relationship for the child reflects this mutuality. Just as the mother is concerned for her child apart from the child's instrumental utility, the child seeks shared experience with her as its own reward and recognizes in her approval a sufficient reason for patterns of behavior. Horkheimer's claim is that this maternal relation, experienced and reciprocated by the child, allows it to relate to future experiences in like manner, opening up a kind of mimetic repetition that "resist[s]" dehumanizing social relations and is "indispensable for the development of the human being."

This claim is left implicit in the passage above, and I will turn now to its explicit development. For Horkheimer, the maternal relation

⁷² Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," in *Critical Theory*, 277.

⁷³ Cf. Rumpf, "Mystical Aura," 314, "Horkheimer recognized in the mother-child interaction the experience of ... a relationship not determined by means and ends."

- (1): conditions the exercise of the reflective faculty (by developing the subject's capacity to judge certain experiences as ends-in-themselves) (2.2.2.1.)
- (2): encourages the open expression of alienation in response to the coldness of the social whole (for instead of placing the worth of the individual in relation to the dominant social ends it serves, it inverts this logic by privileging the happiness of the individual as an end-in-itself) (2.2.2.2.).

2.2.2.1. The maternal, mimesis, and reflective judgment

Many theorists reflecting upon *Dialectic of Enlightenment* presume that cognition and mimesis are two distinct and opposing practices for first-generation critical theorists, so that the instrumental domination over qualitative particularity embodied by the former may only be repaired by a turn to the imitation of such uniqueness embodied in the latter.⁷⁴ Others, however, have noted that Horkheimer does not presume this antagonistic contrast in his reflections on the formative relationship between mother and child, but rather portrays mimesis as a necessary libidinal element in the formation of the capacity for inter-subjectivity, which is the social precondition for the activity of reasoning. In this case, mimesis and cognition are related activities for a subject, in so far as the former is a necessary condition for the latter to develop.⁷⁵ This understands mimesis and cognition as distinct activities, but relates them both to the historical development of the capacity for reasoning. I wish to suggest a third approach to

⁷⁴ For instance: Morton Schoolman, "Avoiding 'embarrassment': Aesthetic Reason and Aporetic Critique in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *Polity* 37, no. 3 (July 2005): 344, 348-349, 358; Julian Roberts, "The Dialectic of Enlightenment," in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67; Morgan, "Project of the Frankfurt School," 94; Papastephanou, "Ulysses' Reason, Nobody's Fault," 55; Martin Morris, "On the Logic of Performative Contradiction," *Review of Politics* 58, no. 4 (1996): 759; C. Fred Alford, "Jürgen Habermas and the Dialectic of Enlightenment: What is Theoretically Fruitful Knowledge?" *Social Research* 52, no. 1 (Spring 1985), 144.

⁷⁵ Rumpf, "Mystical Aura," 315 thus notes that Horkheimer does not construe "libido" and "spirit" as "fixed opposites." Libidinal experience is rather a necessary condition for the development of intersubjectivity, "[Horkheimer] seeks to establish that in the formative process of 'spirit' a libidinal, non-instrumental relationship to people and objects must be preserved. On a preconceptual level, he anticipates what is today referred to as intersubjectivity" (312; cf. 314).

Horkheimer's late reflections, focusing on the relation between libidinal mimesis and the receptive judgments involved in reflective reasoning. While theoretical cognition may simply be a posterior development that arises because the rhythms of libidinous mimesis have formed intersubjective agency, cognition understood as a faculty of reflective reasoning is not simply dependent upon the intersubjectivity shaped by libidinal mimesis but is, in fact, one way of expressing libidinous desire. Reflective cognition is the self-consciousness of a subject moved by the libidinal rhythm of desire in a mimetic relationship. Thus the shape which the early experience of libidinal desire comes to take for a subject directly affects its capacity to reflectively reason as well as its actual reflective judgments regarding experience.

The warmth of the early mimetic relationship with the mother both shapes the child's receptive ability to have future sensuous experiences and models for the child a kind of judgment which identifies certain objects as ends to be desired for their own sake (indeed, these two aspects of the relationship are inextricable). Because libidinal and cognitive elements are intertwined in such a way, if the child is separated from its libidinal object, and experiences this separation as the mother's coldness or as reproach, this will have lasting effects on its ability to identify and embrace objects in the way supposed by reflective judgments. Thus Horkheimer notes in "The Concept of Man" (1957),

After the initial months, mother love, the thing everyone talks about but rarely describes in any precise fashion—becomes decisive. Maternal love does not consist simply in feeling or even in attitude; it must also express itself properly. The well-being of the little child and the trust he has in people and objects around him depend very largely on the peaceful but dynamic friendliness, warmth, and smile of the mother or her substitute. Coldness and indifference, abrupt gestures, restlessness, and displeasure in the one who attends the child can introduce a permanent distortion into his relationship to objects, men and the world, and produce a cold character that is lacking in spontaneous impulses.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Horkheimer, "The Concept of Man," in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 8.

While one may question the irreversibility of such trauma, Horkheimer's central argument is that the ability of the subject to judge experiences as ends-in-themselves "is expanded by the possibilities opened up for identification and love."⁷⁷ Insofar as the receptive judgment of the desirability of an object is dependent on the subject's learned practices of relating to its environment, a loving maternal influence which embraces the child as a pleasurable end-in-itself is a *sine qua non* for the child's own development of the capacity to see the world as a place where such receptive embrace is possible, as well as that which schools the child how to distinguish which experiences should be taken as pleasurable-in-themselves.

In a revealing biographical reflection on Horkheimer's own relationship to his mother, he thus notes,

My mother was a particularly affectionate and loving woman. And if I have encountered something of the good and the beautiful in my life, and if that may be traced in part to my manner of living, then it is probably because in my home—partly from my father, but above all from my mother—I learned about love mimetically. Because one cannot learn what love is from what one is told; it can only be learned from the gleam in the mother's eyes, from her love, from the way she speaks.⁷⁸

Horkheimer notes that the receptive capacity itself is not discursively learned (how could it be, for to attend to a teacher in such a way already requires the capacity), but is modeled or displayed by the way the mother attends to the child, from her facial expression, affective tone, and a variety of other forms of behavior. The mimetic reception of this relation thus acclimates the child to encounter future experiences in the world as expressions of "the good and the beautiful" and thus as worthy objects of its love.

⁷⁷ Horkheimer, "Threats to Freedom," 152.

⁷⁸ Horkheimer, "*Das Schlimme erwarten und doch das Gute versuchen*" (1972), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 442f, quoted in Rumpf, "Mystical Aura," 313-314.

In one of his late interviews, he presents this formulation negatively, arguing that early fearful retraction from the mother is often preserved by adults as an affective state of anxiety which limits their willingness to risk emphatic experience.

Without *knowing* anything of the infinite, we can recognize very well our own finitude. Do we not ... experience daily that we became as we are, we became through events, for which we are not responsible?

Let me give you an example: If a small child stretches his arm out to his mother and the mother replies to this desire for her with an improper response, indifferent and cold, then that can decisively stamp the character of the child, his later behavior towards the world; then he is scarred and withdraws into himself.⁷⁹

Horkheimer's way of framing the relation of mimesis to epistemological conditions of knowledge is instructive: one need not infer a metaphysical postulate like infinite knowledge as a background against which the limits circumscribing finite knowing are intelligible, nor, for that matter, is finite knowing limited simply because of the epistemological inaccessibility of objects "in themselves" (as the transcendental idealist might suppose). Rather limits suppose a real withdrawal, a scarring, an act of coldness that marks the capacity of the child to embrace its world.

Thus, at the pre-linguistic stage, no sharp distinction may be made between the form of a reaction as perceived by a child and its material content: the child learns to embrace a relation as warm or shrink away from it as hostile, what we might term "substantive" content about its social context, precisely from the form of the responses it learns to imitate in relation to its parents. Whether the child has the affective capacity to approach an object, its states of desire or aversion, as well as its cognitive attempt to judge experiences as a neophyte, i.e. how it connects the content of its various experiences in order to adapt to its environment, are thus inextricably related at this

⁷⁹ Horkheimer, "*Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen*" (1970), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 396, his emphasis. For a parallel passage, note Horkheimer, "Threats to Freedom," 152. He articulates the epistemological implications of this thought clearly in an aphorism, "Subject-Object" (1957-1958), in *Dawn and Decline*: 158, "If the first grasping which cannot yet differentiate between subject and object is inhibited, the subject will never be able to lose and recover itself in the object by passing through the opposition between the two."

early stage. The mimetic relation to the mother thus forms in the agent a capacity to have emphatic experience as well as shaping the content such experience will have for a subject. Developing these insights in relation to the subject's development, Horkheimer notes elsewhere that even the most elemental psychic reactions to one's environment are themselves learned social practices. The importance of this passage in demonstrating Horkheimer's understanding of reflective reasoning as a socially learned practice not simply an "internal" faculty of cognitive self-reflection (as it is portrayed, for instance, in thinkers like Dilthey) warrants quoting it at length,

In the first year of life, before the human being is able to reflect and to distinguish himself properly from his surroundings he is already in good measure being determined by society, right down to those aspects of his being which will develop only much later. For among the capabilities which every man possesses as a biological being is the ability to assimilate and imitate. His behavior and gestures, his tone of voice, his very walk are all an echo in the child of the ways of some loved and admired adult. Psychic reactions are acquired, in the form if not their content; moreover if a rigid separation of form and content leads to error in the analysis of a work of art, how much more in the interpretation of human feelings! Sadness and happiness, attention sought and given, shyness and devotion come into existence with the repetition of behavior and gestures, for, as Goethe says, "the outward is the inward." What we thoughtlessly ascribe to psychic heritage originates to a decisive degree in the impressions and reactions of earliest childhood, and is confirmed and modified by the circumstances and events of later years. Whether a man is bent on promoting his ego or is capable of vital interest in objective situations and of dedication to men and things; ... all this is not simply a matter of natural fact but is the outcome of a history.⁸⁰

In this passage, Horkheimer sounds a familiar leitmotif of his work on the relation between affect and cognition by noting that the inferences a mature subject draws regarding its environment arise from and are intimately related to affective states regarding the whole, like sadness, happiness, shyness, and devotion. Yet here he adds to this that both related aspects of reasoning, libidinal affective states and patterns of inference, are learned by the subject as social habits, and thus they have a concrete social "history." Whether the subject experiences the world simply as a function of the self

⁸⁰ Horkheimer, "Concept of Man," 8-9.

(i.e. as merely instrumental), or has a “dedication to men and things” (i.e. experiences objects of concern or devotion as worthwhile for their own sake), thus relates to a social precondition: how the subject has learned to experience the world in its early mimetic relationships.

While Horkheimer is adamant here about the importance of the maternal role, he recognizes that there may be surrogates for the biological mother. In his biographical reflections he thus suggests that the love of his father had an influence on him structurally akin to the embrace of his mother (though admittedly to a lesser degree), and elsewhere he entertains the possibility that other social institutions, like the university, might be able to facilitate relationships between its members so as to compensate for a loss of intimacy in the home.⁸¹ This is a halting, partial recognition that the social role associated with the maternal instinct is not, in actuality, inextricable from the sex of the care-giver. Developing this point at any length would have enabled Horkheimer to nuance his later accounts of the loss of the maternal, a point we will return to when we suggest a repair of his account below.

2.2.2.2. The maternal, mimesis, and the transfiguration of an instrumental whole

In a passage that complements the preceding reflections on the role of mimesis in shaping the reasoning capacity of the young child, Horkheimer notes that the institution of the family continues to train the subject as it matures to reason reflectively regarding its own relationship to the social whole. Within the family, the subject is not judged in terms of its ability to “fit” into the predetermined ends reproduced by the economic forces shaping the social whole. Rather, the whole is evaluated by the caring mother or

⁸¹ Horkheimer, “*Was wir ‘Sinn’ nennen, wird verschwinden*” (1970), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 357. Note also the instructive way he parallels the domestic formation of the child by mother and father with the influence of the educator in “On Education” (1961-1962), in *Dawn and Decline*, 214-215.

concerned lover in terms of the subject's qualitatively particular pain or happiness.

Instrumental judgments about the utility of the subject in its public activities are thus inverted and the contemporary shape of the whole reappears in a foreign form. The sensuous individual thus learns to understand itself not as a *function* of the economic and social practices of the whole, but as the *end* served by them.

The middle-class family, though it has frequently been an agent of obsolescent social patterns, has made the individual aware of other potentialities than his labor or vocation opened for him. As a child, and later as a lover, he saw reality not in the hard light of its practical biddings but in a distant perspective which lessened the force of its commandments. This realm of freedom, which originated outside the workshop, was adulterated with the dregs of all past cultures, yet it was man's private preserve in the sense that he could there transcend the function society imposed upon him by way of its division of labor. Seen at such a distance, the appurtenances of reality fuse into images that are foreign to the conventional systems of ideas, into esthetic experience and production. ... [W]orks of art—objective products of the mind detached from the context of the practical world—harbor principles though which the world that bore them appears alien and false.⁸²

This comprehension of the whole “detached from ... the practical world” inverts its valuation. The family thus provides a space that privileges the experiences of the individual as interpretive keys to the meaning of the whole. The subject, in turn, is taught to voice its alienation at the harshness of social forms, and such alienation, when given a voice, depicts a judgment regarding reality in different hues than is possible using the criterion of the public marketplace.

The relation between the family and the artist is not merely analogous, for Horkheimer, it is causal. When he defines aesthetic judgment in this essay as comprehension of “the beautiful as an object of disinterested pleasure,” achieved by an “atomic subject ... without consulting social values and ends,”⁸³ he does not thereby intend to imply that artistic genius alone serves as the precondition for such a sensuous recasting of the world. This would abstract “personality” from social practices as well as

⁸² Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture,” 274-275.

⁸³ Ibid., 273.

abstracting the individual agent from social relations. Rather, a “genius” that recasts the whole in terms of the sensuous beauty of a particular ephemeral moment learns how to appreciate fragile experience for its own sake through the social practices of the family. The capacity to recognize, receive, and then recast emphatic experience is a learned social capacity, a practice with a concrete history.

For instance, Horkheimer notes, in the face of imposed dependency the mother in previous forms of the family embraced the disenfranchised child as an end-in-itself in solidarity. Thus she was able to teach the child to imagine the whole in terms of his own sensuous particularity. In her forced dependency, she served as an intermediary that sheltered the child against a world that understood it simply as a function of instrumentalized ends instead of a sensuous end-in-itself.

The mother, cut off from the community of the males and despite an unjustified idealization being herself forced into a dependent situation, represented a principle other than reality; she could sincerely dream the dreams of utopia with the child, and she was his natural ally whether she wished it or not. Thus there was a force in his life which allowed him to develop his own individuality concomitantly with his adjustment to the external world.⁸⁴

Importantly, the two teleologies informing the exercise of reason which Horkheimer previously had described as in tension in “Art and Mass Culture” (1941), self-preservation (“the hard light of ... practical biddings”) and the pursuit of self-chosen ends (“other potentialities than [the child’s] labor or vocation opened for him”), are not placed in binary opposition to one another in this passage from “Authoritarianism and the Family Today” (1949), but are rather portrayed as related consonant ends which the individual may learn to order through rational reflection. The shelter of the maternal relation, Horkheimer notes, does not negate the need for adaptation to the practical demands of reality, but rather enables a temporary rapprochement between such

⁸⁴ Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family,” 390.

demands and the child's self-recognition of its own sensuous particularity: it "allowed him to develop his own individuality concomitantly with his adjustment to the external world." It is not inconsequential that the attempt by the subject to situate its own sensuous judgment regarding ends in relation to the imperatives of the social whole has to be "developed." While the pursuit of self-preservation is always mediated, for Horkheimer, in relation to other social ends, the fittedness between other ends and such preservation cannot simply be assumed, but requires self-conscious reflective activity.

Of course, the possibility of this rapprochement does not solely depend on the maternal relation. Although it is a necessary condition for rapprochement, it is not sufficient. Concrete historical conditions must actually exist which allow at least the possibility of an approximate fit between self-preservation and the pursuit of particular ends-in-themselves. Thus, on the one hand, in "Art and Mass Culture" Horkheimer notes that the contemporary individual experiences alienation because the historically mediated split between the two seems impossible to bridge. Yet, on the other, with equal insistence, he notes that the maternal relation at one point held forth the possibility of a fittedness between self-preservation and sensuous particularity of the particular subject. We will explore in more detail how Horkheimer understands this past historical possibility in our discussion of the paternal relation. For the moment it is important to note that what Horkheimer affirms is not the inevitability of reconciliation as such due to the influence of the mother, nor the impossibility of such reconciliation due to present historical conditions, but rather a possibility that is latent but blocked by adverse social conditions, which could be activated, *ex hypothesi*, if those social conditions were altered or if the maternal relation could be preserved in a new way which overcomes them.

Multiple ambiguities and problems with the above formulations should already be evident. Horkheimer's analysis focuses sharply "not on woman but on her children, specifically her sons."⁸⁵ Absent is any discussion of the way that the relationship to the mother teaches the daughter to acquiesce to or resist violent patriarchal structures of dependency. Although Horkheimer references the forced dependency which subjugates the subjectivity of the woman in the home, he thus privileges male subjectivity in his analysis of the effects of this enforced dependency.⁸⁶ We will return to this justified critique and suggest a possible repair in 2.2.3.

2.2.2.3. Changes in the historical shape of the maternal role

If it is true that the maternal influence is one of the decisive social antecedents that shapes subsequent public reasoning, as the social whole evolves and the maternal relation changes so too does the typical way individuals learn to reason within the family. As he turns to relate changes in mimesis to the altered practices of the social whole, it is unsurprising that Horkheimer focuses squarely again on what he has termed the "pervasive practice" of political economy, competition. As the unit of economic competition changes from the bourgeois household to corporate organizations, he notes, the family and, along with it, the individual's adaptation to its social whole, changes markedly. In the 19th century, solidarity within the family served the economic interests of bourgeois enterprise,

The national economy of the nineteenth century ... still included the functioning of the family as an economic unit. Not only had the mechanization of the household not progressed so far as it is today—and even today it constitutes a residue of primordial economic forms—but women, children, and other relatives were necessary for the management of innumerable business units.

In the Victorian age the artisan workshop still flourished, the small or middle-sized enterprise was the predominant type of undertaking; the giant concern, the department store, and the retail sales organization of important industries were only in the making. Business administration and management were not yet scientifically

⁸⁵ Mills, *Woman, Nature and Psyche*, 108.

⁸⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 112-113, 116-121 and Benjamin, "Authority and the Family Revisited," 49, fn. 47.

regulated and planned. Success in enterprise still depended to a great extent on the solidarity of the family.⁸⁷

In contemporary industrialized society, however, such solidarity is no longer required: the household is no longer a locus of the economy. With the advent of the war economy in the early twentieth century, there was no longer either the economic necessity or the related traditional taboos enforcing the cohesion of the family.

At least in times of war and preparedness industry offers millions of jobs for skilled and unskilled women, which means that work outside the house becomes respectable for them. Rupture with the family therefore loses its terror for the girl as well as for the boy ... Authority in the home assumes an irrational aspect.⁸⁸

Household economies are eclipsed as the basic “units” of competitiveness ensuring the survival of their members, thus one may break with patriarchal authority without entailing either economic ruin or social stigma. For unlike in early modernity, domestic life is no longer tied in any intrinsic way to production. As employees of corporations, the new “units” of competition, individual family members no longer require the family for the sake of their self-preservation.

Horkheimer recognizes that such emancipation gives women hitherto unparalleled self-determination, a way out from under violent a-symmetrical relations of dependency.

A good many of the evil effects of the old rigid bourgeois marriage—tyranny of husband over wife and children; the unhappiness arising from the fact that the marital relations, felt to be central, meant a whole series of abnegations—are avoided in the emerging situation; we need only think at the turn of the century of Strindberg’s *Dance of Death*.⁸⁹

This late passage is thus an (all too brief) recognition that the women’s entrance into the marketplace has substantially mitigated the oppression once faced due to previous relations of dependency (which parallels, it should be noted, the concrete freedom given

⁸⁷ Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family,” 382-383.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 383-384.

⁸⁹ Horkheimer, “The Future of Marriage” (1966), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 100. Cf. Horkheimer’s analysis 30 years earlier in “Authority and the Family,” 119, “Of the two great dramatic critics of modern society Ibsen has portrayed the fact of woman’s subjection and exploitation, while Strindberg has shown its result: the wife in a bourgeois marriage, restricted in her development, unsatisfied, spiritless.”

the modern worker who is released from the violent immediacy of feudal relations of dependency).

Yet Horkheimer is less than sanguine about the implications this may have for relations between the mother and child within the family. As the woman gains a new independence from the feudal authority of the domestic sphere, she faces the daily strain of being treated as a means for the end of economic productivity. For her, this strain is all the more intense given her continued subordination to mediated forms of patriarchy in the market (as this is measured in wages and advancement), as well as within the home (her subordination to duties typically associated with a traditional domestic role continues).⁹⁰ In the past, “her passive role, which nothing could justify, also enabled her to avoid reduction to object status” in the marketplace. Yet today, she “is pushed more and more into work outside the home,” and this situation “makes new claims on her psychic capacities and interests.”⁹¹ For instance, in an inversion of his earlier analysis of the genesis of the artist, Horkheimer notes that the decision to be married is made today in accordance with what is economically advisable in terms of the dominant ends privileged by society,

In marriage, the relations between partners must, above all, be rich in results, like those of teams in industry and sport. If a marriage proves burdensome it can be dissolved, and a person may perhaps be more successful with a new partner. Each partner is evaluated in terms of function, and this affects even the relations of the sexes before marriage, so that these relations become more uniform, more practical, less charged with momentous significance.⁹²

⁹⁰ For this analysis, I draw on Mill’s poignant description of the challenges women face upon entering economic life in modern society in *Woman, Nature and Psyche*, 107 (cf. 113)

⁹¹ Horkheimer, “Concept of Man,” 11.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 17.

Later, Horkheimer concludes, “each partner in the marriage (the very word ‘partner’ is significant) is evaluated even within the home according to the criteria that prevail in society at large.”⁹³ The relation between man and woman no longer signifies:

- (1): A *rebellion* of individuals against the dominant practice of a noble’s consolidation of property, done on the basis of the value of the sensuous particularity of the beloved (the pre-cursor of the bourgeois “decision” to marry),⁹⁴ nor
- (2): A *reserve* apart from the marketplace where the husband dehumanized by the market or the physically weak child might be valued for its own sake (the early modern form of family life).

It is no longer, that is, determined by a principle that inverts the dominant ends of property or production. Rather, it presumes that:

- (3): Each agent measures the utility of their relationship from the outset in terms of the dominant practices reproducing society.

While relations (1) and (2) embodied a form of solidarity, a recognition that the sensuous particularity of a subject stood in fundamental friction with dominant societal practices, in (3) this form of empathetic receptive judgment is being eclipsed in favor of a subsumptive theoretical judgment based upon the taken for granted interests already informing the marketplace.

While Horkheimer maintains that the genesis of (1) and (2) is rooted in unjustifiable relations of dependency, he also notes that the maternal response to such oppression allowed an inversion of dominant practices, judged in terms of the sensuous needs and desires of the particular male individual: the lover in the case of (1), the husband and child in the case of (2). However, as Horkheimer notes in his reference to Strindberg’s

⁹³ Ibid., 24.

⁹⁴ Cf. the discussion of “On the History of Sexuality” at the conclusion of section 2.2.1, in which Horkheimer describes “the appearance of love as a social rebellion.”

Dance of Death, the original context which allowed such empathy as a response to patriarchy violently denied the woman's own subjectivity. In the present social whole, there is thus no "pure" standpoint from which to escape the agonistics. The inversion of dominant public practices was itself rent with a fundamental contradiction: sensitivity toward the subjectivity of the father and male child reproduced amnesia towards the sensuous particularity of the wife.

The repair of this subjugating amnesia is sometimes taken to be (3). However, this also raises a difficulty, Horkheimer notes, for the price of entry into the marketplace for the woman *qua* economic subject, thus her escape from the violence enforced by patriarchal dependency within the home, is the expression of her subjectivity in the form which once enforced the marginalization of her own affective concern as well as dehumanizing other family members. If the self-preservation of the wife depends on acclimating to a rationalized market, the way the maternal is mediated is thus altered: the woman's concern for the child is no longer expressed as pity and compassion at the violation of alienated subjectivity, as attention to the sensuous particular. It is now mediated as a desire to teach the child to adapt its sensuous particularity to the whole, to end lingering alienation and acclimate to the dominant practices of social life.

Horkheimer notes,

Not that she treats the child more brutally than in former times; just the opposite. The modern mother plans the education of her child almost scientifically, from the well-balanced diet to the equally well-balanced ratio between reprimand and friendliness, as recommended by the popular psychologist. Her whole attitude toward the child becomes rational; even love is administered as an ingredient of pedagogical hygiene. ...

... The consequences reach into the most tender relations between mother and child. She ceases to be a mitigating intermediary between him and cold reality and becomes just another mouthpiece of the latter.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Horkheimer, "Authoritarianism and the Family," 389-390.

Just as the spouses embrace each other not in rebellion against dominant rationality but according to calculations regarding the successful adaptation to it, so the woman's concern for her children is mediated as the sensible recognition of a competitor in the marketplace: children must be acclimated to achieve a similar form of successful adaptation. Yet if the empathetic embrace of the mother is required for the development of a reflective form of reasoning, and it is through enjoying this relation and learning to imitate it in a reciprocal return of love that the child develops both its sense of its own sensuous particularity as well as its ability to open itself to experience, the loss of this relationship atrophies the subject's capacity to reason reflectively.

Is the alternative, for Horkheimer, a regressive embrace of patriarchy? In our introduction, we noted that Horkheimer's late reflections have often been interpreted in this manner, as the nostalgic ruminations of a conservative critic of culture. It is to this question we will now turn.

2.2.3. The Janus-faced domestic sphere

From his earliest writings on the family, Horkheimer privileges the domestic sphere as a place of retreat from the instrumentalized coldness of late modern life. In the family, the social whole is seen as existing for the sensuous subject, and the cold teleology of the marketplace is inverted by this empathetic embrace. In an apparent contradiction, Horkheimer is equally adamant in passages we have examined that the unconditional shape of this response is itself a mask: the appearance of "spontaneous submission" is actually itself the internalization of "subjugation;" the "loving breast" is actually a "violated heart;" the woman's violent "defeat" is reflected back to society as a psychological disorder, internalized "despair;" she is "cut off from the community of the males" thereby "forced into a dependent situation," and this is itself grotesquely mirrored in "an unjustified idealization" of the maternal. Conversely, the husband's

obsolescence to the idealized maternal is also a mask, “Behind man’s admiration for beauty” lies “boundless scorn” and ultimately the threat of violence should the admiration be refused. Thus an original relation of violence constitutes and shapes the genesis of reflective subjectivity. The social precondition for recognizing the distortion of reification, the recognition of the relation between the sensuous concrete individual as an end-in-itself and its social practices, is itself formed as a reaction to an asymmetrical social relation that is construed as a “natural” immediacy.

While I take these descriptions of the feudal violence characterizing relations of patriarchal dependency from an aforementioned note in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), we have examined parallel passages from a wide variety of essays such as “Authority and the Family” (1936), “Authoritarianism and the Family” (1949) and “The Concept of Man” (1957). Thus two strands, the praise of the domestic sphere and its critique as an institution of patriarchal violence, sit side-by-side uneasily throughout Horkheimer’s reflections from the 30s through the 50s.

How can Horkheimer persist in writing both? As we have seen, the tension between the two is often relaxed by interpreters in favor of Horkheimer’s qualified approbation of solidarity within the family. It is then inferred from this that he embraces a regressive conservatism that whitewashes conditions of dependency. Mothers and daughters are thus understood simply as preconditions for the proper functioning of male subjectivity, not as subjects in their own right. This leads finally to a situation in Horkheimer’s later writings in which he not only ignores, but actively justifies such dependency.

Interpreters should indeed be suspicious of the regressive embrace of a patriarchal past. Our investigation, however, suggests an alternative approach to understanding Horkheimer’s reflections, which clarifies what is of continuing value and what stands in need of significant repair in his account. Horkheimer asserts:

(1): The reaction of women to a position of forced dependency in the patriarchal family evidences an actual sensitivity to the alienation of the child and spouse and an opposition to dominant practices in public life that dehumanize them.

(2): The end of forced dependency:

(2a): Allows the woman to exit relations of dependency, signaling an end to the oppressive semi-feudal mediation of gender relations,

(2b): Allows the woman access to dominant market practices, encouraging a particular form of calculating subjectivity and discouraging an awareness of the particularity of sensuous subjects.

One might infer from the fact that Horkheimer laments the form of subjectivity that women must embrace in order to gain effective entry into the market (i.e. 2b), that he accepts relations of dependency *per se* as a necessary evil. Or one might infer that he does indeed hold that there needs to be an end to the dependency relation (i.e. 2a), while also recognizing that this end will itself reproduce a distinct kind of suffering, at least if it does not preserve the former concern for sensuous subjectivity in a distinct form.

Inasmuch as this former concern is not preserved by 2b, one can note that it fails as an adequate preservation of what was humanizing in a past historical form (i.e. 1).

In this case it would not be incompatible to hold both that (1) is in no sense justified and also that whatever its merits may be in rectifying past relations of dependency, (2b) is unsatisfactory due to the eclipse of a concern for sensuous particularity. One may thus note that the present change in gender relations does not preserve a necessary regard for sensuous subjectivity as well as maintain that past relations of dependency should be negated. The recognition that the present form of gender relations does not allow the preservation of a past concern with sensuous subjectivity would not then entail a justification of asymmetrical gender relations.

This best describes Horkheimer's approach. While he does speak of the family as "second-womb" or as a "harbor" from an instrumentalized world, his critique of the patriarchal genesis of the institution suggests that his argument should not be mistaken for a *post factum* justification of an oppressive history, nor as a judgment regarding the normativity of its modern bourgeois form. Horkheimer acknowledges the ways that the female psyche is marred by the oppressive relation of dependency. Yet he also maintains that the maternal expression of love, as a form of marred subjectivity, is not merely the passive acceptance of this state of affairs. Rather, it is understood as a way of reacting against the dehumanizing features of the market, which preserves a concern for the sensuous subject. Horkheimer thus walks a fine line in the essays we have examined, acknowledging the way woman have been objectified and silenced by patriarchal practices, yet refusing to narrate their response to this state of affairs simply as passivity.

By contrast, his later interviews in the 60s and early 70s do not focus with any sustained attention on the continuing way oppressive relations constitute domestic life.⁹⁶ Instead, he emphasizes the inadequacy of (2b) as a negation of (1), by pointing out what has been lost by the end of traditional family relations. It is not that Horkheimer does not recognize the dissolution of the traditional maternal role as an advance over past relations of dependency. On the contrary, as a previously quoted passage from "The Future of Marriage" illustrates, he continues to reference it explicitly as having corrected the "evil effects" of this dependency. What remains troubling, however, is that he does not develop the possibility that this advance may be a factor offsetting, and even justifying, the suffering arising from the dissolution of traditional family ties. The

⁹⁶ For several instances of this failure, note the following passages in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*: "Die Funktion der Theologie in der Gesellschaft" (1969), 313; "Was wir 'Sinn' nennen," 355-357; "Die Sehnsucht," 399-400.

passage thus comes as an afterthought at the end of an essay decrying various forms of suffering that arise because of the exit of women from domestic dependency.

Thus while Horkheimer draws useful distinctions between the expression of maternal solidarity and its historical genesis in forms of patriarchal violence, and while he offers a compelling account of what the loss of this form of maternal reaction might mean for the development of the capacity to reason reflectively, he offers no reason why the contemporary negation of the feudal qualities of a past form of the family (2b) must itself be maintained, or how one might feasibly preserve a concern for the sensuous particular in a contemporary form of the family. He is ambivalent about what aspects of the present negation must also be preserved in order to ensure that social relations do not regress.

Horkheimer notes, in what may be taken as a programmatic statement of his mature theoretical work,

If social progress is really to live up to its name, it must preserve what was good in the past. To suppress the thought of the cost a culture pays for its new miracles and to adopt an official optimism is to be enslaved to an evil status quo. ... It is true enough that a critical grasp of the present supposes insight into the injustice and lies of the past, and especially a knowledge of how earlier culture contradicted its own ideas It is also true, however, that critical theory, which we follow, gives unquestioned priority to existing reality as its object. ... The demand that we construct a better social totality and develop in a positive way the new possibilities opened up by technology can be met only when our conscience refuses to rest easy with the disappearing freedom of the individual; the fact that such freedom was earlier limited to the bourgeois can make no difference here.⁹⁷

The fact that present practices rectify past injustice cannot eclipse the suffering which also arises from the way such practices erode the benefits of past historical forms of life. Yet the fact that freedom was limited in past forms of life does indeed affect the form which present social relations have come to take. This latter fact requires equal recognition, and Horkheimer admits as much by noting that *both* “insight into the

⁹⁷ Horkheimer, “Threats to Freedom,” 138-139.

injustice and lies of the past” as well as an uneasy conscience regarding present advances is necessary. Elsewhere, in “Authoritarianism and the Family” (1949) he even goes so far as to suggest programmatically, “If ideas, cherished through the centuries, are rigidly maintained against the course of history instead of being preserved by being developed and transformed, they finally are deserted by truth and turn into empty ideologies—however strongly they may be sustained.”⁹⁸ This would seem to require that one recognize in the present “course of history” a form of reaction against the suffering generated by past forms of patriarchal oppression, such that to *preserve* what was proper in past forms of life would require, not the affirmation of such traditional relations as such, but a recognition of the need for both their preservation (in certain regards) and their creative transformation (in others). According to Horkheimer’s own understanding of the practical task of sublation, which requires both the preservation as well as the negation of distinguishable elements of historical social practices in order that they might be continued in a more adequate form in relation to the concerns of a contemporary form of life, his account of the family thus remains incomplete. How might this lack in his theorizing be repaired?

If Horkheimer had distinguished the “maternal” more clearly as a social category from sex as biological, this would have enabled him, minimally, to thematize what he hints at implicitly in several suggestive passages. The maternal embrace, understood as a *social* practice between a parent and child, can be initiated with the child by caregivers of either sex as well as fostered by institutions other than the family. Recognizing this would have allowed him to clearly affirm both the way current social relations attenuate the oppressive dependency fostered in traditional patriarchal families, and, at the same time, the cost of this development, the end of a concern for the sensuous particularity of

⁹⁸ Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family,” 384.

the child, which must be addressed in evaluating changing social and institutional contexts.

If it is true that society as a whole and not merely the nuclear family no longer contains a space for the recognition of sensuous particular individuals but is rather characterized by an “objective, generalized denial of nurturance,”⁹⁹ an analysis of how the concern for the sensuous individual as an end-in-itself might be preserved in a new historical form is particularly pressing. Horkheimer’s work, suitably repaired, remains relevant for theorists in two respects. First, it demonstrates that the loss of this nurturance has profound implications for the formation of the reasoning habits of the modern subject. Second, it suggests the need for institutional alternatives in which habits of reflective reasoning and judgment on the basis of sensuous experience may continue to be learned by the subject. As we will see, Horkheimer’s own reflections on liturgical communities investigate one such alternative. Finally, it is worth closing by noting that Horkheimer’s analysis does not differentiate between the male and female experience of maternal nurturance, and privileges the former as his model. Any future attempt to address the issue of societal structures of nurturance must address this glaring omission.

2.3. The paternal role and its changing relation to theoretical judgment

In his essays on the family, Horkheimer wishes to examine the social and historical preconditions not merely of the reflective form of judgment but also its theoretical form. Just as the ability to judge a relation as an end-in-itself is learned by the child mimetically *via* the maternal relation, so it learns the ability to judge relations as instrumental to its own self-preservation *via* the paternal relation. Horkheimer begins his analysis of this relation by noting that the bourgeois son’s imitation of his father

⁹⁹ Benjamin, “Authority and the Family Revisited,” 36.

taught him to judge social relations independently. From his father's attitude towards the economic and social world, the son also came to learn a constellation of other virtues related to this independence like self-control, truthfulness, and thrift.

The self-control of the individual, the disposition for work and discipline, the ability to hold firmly to certain ideas, consistency in practical life, application of reason, perseverance and pleasure in constructive activity could all be developed, in the circumstances, only under the dictation and guidance of the father whose own education had been won in the school of life.¹⁰⁰

This education prepared the son well for his role as a competitor in the liberal economic order. Instead of conforming to the societal practices occurring around him as heteronomous forces, he learned to exercise reflexive judgment regarding how such practices impacted the interests of his family. This also provided him with values against which he was able to measure the behavior of his father when "his practices contradicted his own ideology."¹⁰¹ The imitation of the father as a model thus provided both the independent perspective as well as the ethical criterion by which the child was able engage in a critique of the social practices around him.

The bourgeois son's acceptance of his father's authority is based, Horkheimer notes, on a rational calculation: insofar as the father equips the son with capacities which are instrumental to his success in the economy (and thus his self-preservation), recognition of the father's authority is rational for the son. The son thus learns how to practice what we have termed the faculty of theoretical reason in his relationship with the father.

Yet it is important to clarify precisely what is deemed rational in this equation. Anyone who wishes to infer from the son's obsolescence to the father a *justification* for the patriarchal structure of the domestic relation makes a mistake. Horkheimer notes, rather, that one must make a distinction between the son's judgment regarding the utility of his relationship to the father, and a judgment regarding the asymmetrical dependency

¹⁰⁰ Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 101.

¹⁰¹ Horkheimer, "End of Reason," 41.

upon which the relationship itself is based. The former is rational given the pre-existing situation of asymmetrical dependency, yet this situation itself is thoroughly irrational for the participants involved.

The unmediated identification of natural strength with estimability in the bourgeois family operates as an educational factor with reference to the authority-structure characteristic of this society. But another, likewise seemingly natural characteristic of the father operates in the same way. He is master of the house because he earns or at least possesses the money. ... [T]he fact that in the average bourgeois family the husband possesses the money, which is power in the form of substance, and determines how it is to be spent, makes the wife, sons, and daughters even in modern times “his,” puts their lives in large measure into his hands, and forces them to submit to his orders and guidance. As in the economy of recent centuries direct force has played an increasingly smaller role in coercing men into accepting a work situation, so too in the family rational considerations and free obedience have replaced slavery and subjection. But the relationship in question is that of the isolated and helpless individual who must bow to circumstances whether they be corrupt or reasonable. The despair of women and children ... the material and psychic exploitation consequent upon the economically based hegemony of the father have weighed mankind down no less in recent centuries than in antiquity, except for very limited periods, regions, and social strata.¹⁰²

On the one hand, Horkheimer notes, “rational considerations and free obedience have replaced slavery and subjection” in the family. If one begins by taking the economic and domestic relations characterizing early modern life for granted, any male agent who wishes to thrive in the marketplace would be rational to submit to the authority of the father *qua* provider and educator. Yet the father’s ability to play these roles arises due to the economic and social dependency of women in the home. While it is rational for the son to recognize the *resultant* instrumental utility of the patriarchal relation, the dependency at the origin of this state of affairs is comprehended by him not as rational or irrational but rather as “natural”: it is not judged according to any standard, let alone that of instrumental utility. Thus Horkheimer elsewhere notes, “In consequence of the seeming naturalness of paternal power with its twofold foundation in the father’s economic position and his physical strength with its legal backing, growing up in the

¹⁰² Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” 105-106.

restricted family is a first-rate schooling in the authority behavior specific to this society.”¹⁰³ This societal behavior, Horkheimer notes, is actually irrational, it does not correspond to the self-interest of subordinate parties in society and is only continued because of existing force and the ideological notion that such social structuring is natural. The dependency of the members of the family upon the father is similar structurally: it is a social relation masquerading as a natural given.

Despite its irrational precondition, the resultant judgment regarding the economic rationality of the authority of the father for the son is nevertheless framed by Horkheimer in terms of a judgment of what we have termed “theoretical” reason. However, in his later work, Horkheimer often makes contrastive statements that appear to stand in no little tension with this construal of the functional (or instrumental) rationality of the paternal relation. For instance he notes, “In earlier times a loving imitation of the self-reliant, prudent man, devoted to his duty, was the source of moral autonomy in the individual,”¹⁰⁴ though today, “the child takes a realistic view” because “the socially conditioned weakness of the father, which is not disproved by his occasional outbreaks of masculinity, prevents the child’s identification with him.”¹⁰⁵ A contrast is thus drawn in this later essay between the child who embraces the “substantive” moral commitments of the father out of love, and the child who is concerned exclusively with the instrumental end of self-preservation which the weakened father no longer serves. This appears inconsistent with the earlier texts we have just examined, in which Horkheimer portrays the internalization of a father’s behavior by the son, not as an embrace of the former’s “substantive” values like honesty or autonomy as ends-in-themselves, but rather as a kind of instrumental reasoning

¹⁰³ Ibid., 107.

¹⁰⁴ Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family,” 388.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

which embraces such ends for the sake of economic self-preservation. This would appear to exclude, *per definitionem*, efforts to base the internalization of “substantive” moral judgments in the paternal relation. On this basis, Benjamin concludes, “Despite his 1936 analysis of the father, in which he described obedience as a formal response demanded by a structural role rather than substantive behavior, Horkheimer returns [in his 1949 essay] to a positive image of the father.”¹⁰⁶

The argument that there is a contradiction between Horkheimer’s early and late reflections on the family rests on the idea that the loving imitation of the father by the son (which embraces “substantive” values for their own sake) and the calculated imitation of father (for the sake of “instrumental” self-preservation) are mutually exclusive motives for the internalization of paternal authority. Yet I wish to argue that Horkheimer’s reflections on the paternal relation fundamentally challenge this dichotomy. For Horkheimer in “Authoritarianism and the Family Today” (1949), the embrace by the child of a “substantive” value (such as autonomy) for its own sake as well as the child’s pragmatic concern to adapt to economic reality describe, not two *opposed* kinds of reasoning regarding the internalization of paternal authority, but rather two intimately related sides of the same process of internalization for a subject.

Far from a paean to the traditional family as a preserve of pure “substantive” values, Horkheimer begins “Authoritarianism and the Family Today” by noting that the patriarchal dependency relation within the traditional family was once judged rational by its members precisely because of their instrumental concern with economic self-preservation.

The power of the father over related or unrelated members of the home, workshop, or manorial estate had always been based on the intrinsic necessity of the direct form of dependence for the life process of society. ... The legal framework, by

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin, “Authority and the Family Revisited,” 48.

which the family is protected, receives its meaning from the social significance of what it protects. A son's future share in his father's property had been as powerful a motive for obedience as disinheritance was a menace.¹⁰⁷

Despite the broadly common goal of household economies and emerging industries (the self-preservation of their participants), the household economy was qualitatively distinct from the emerging industrial economy, for within it a pre-modern form of loyalty continued to be economically rational for the self-interest of household members in a way it was not, for instance, in the case of a factory worker,

In the sphere of manual labor and of numerous other functions in industry and commerce, society had reached a stage at which the direct and inviolable loyalty of the nonrelated members of the *familia* in the old sense, the slaves and serfs, could be replaced by the rational interest of the worker through the labor contract.¹⁰⁸

In stark contrast,

Success in enterprise still depended to a great extent on the solidarity of the family. The sons of middle-class business men were, on the one hand, largely indispensable in their father's trade and, on the other, unable to find an equally satisfying position outside it. The daughters were needed in both house and shop. Familial authority in the middle classes was halfway intact.¹⁰⁹

Thus the family preserved a place in which reasoning about self-preservation led to a form of solidarity, or identification with an organic totality *en miniature*.

As economic productivity became increasingly divorced from household economies this economic basis for loyalty dwindled,

With the disappearance of this essential factor, the respect of family members for the head of the house, their attachment to the family as a whole, and their loyalty to its symbols dwindled away. ... What appeared as an individual disaster in the world of middle-class proprietors can be faced more quietly in a world in which everybody is an employee.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Horkheimer, "Authoritarianism and the Family," 383.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 382.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 383.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Thus “rupture with the family ... loses its terror” and “authority in the home assumes an irrational aspect” for both sons and daughters.¹¹¹

In saying it “assumes” an irrational aspect, Horkheimer wishes to contrast the past acceptance of the authority of the father, which judged his authority on the basis of the consonance between the family member’s own instrumental self-interest and the solidarity of the family, with a kind of judgment that accepts the authority of the father simply because of its overwhelming brute force as a natural immediacy, despite the fact that it has lost its rational utility. Thus he notes that contemporary subjects inhabit “a world which adheres to familial authority after the inner substance of the family has been dissolved.”¹¹² While subordination to the authority of the father in the family as a social unit continues, this relationship to the family whole is no longer consonant with or subjected to the judgment of the individual on the basis of its economic self-interest. The justification of such authority is treated as an innate “natural” quality of the father, or it takes the form of a simple capitulation to brute force. Thus Horkheimer notes,

As the family has largely ceased to exercise specific authority over its members, it has become a training ground for authority as such. The old dynamics of familial submission are still operative, but they make for an all-pervasive spirit of adjustment and authoritarian aggressiveness rather than for a furtherance of the interests of the family and its members.¹¹³

The justification of authority relations thus regresses behind its earlier form as a rational reflection on the importance of solidarity within the family for the realization of the interests of the individual. What was once judged to be rational now appears as a natural heteronomous immediacy.

For Horkheimer, following Freud, to participate in civilization successfully is to self-consciously defer the immediate gratification of sensuous desires through a reflective

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 392.

¹¹³ Ibid., 388.

judgment that this deferral will not be indefinite, but rather will facilitate a future realization that comports with the subject's attempt to realize a totality of its interests. To participate in civilization unsuccessfully, by contrast, is to simply suppress such desires without consciously ordering them in a rational way in relation to the anticipation of a future realization. Desires for sensuous ends, if they are not taken up cognitively and ordered rationally in relation to future fulfillment, do not simply lie dormant. Those who "suppress and abase nature," instead of incorporating their desires into a judgment regarding future actualization, are increasingly tempted, notes Horkheimer, to "identify themselves with [nature's] more powerful surrogates—the race, fatherland, leader, cliques, and tradition. For them, all these words mean the same thing—the irresistible reality that must be honored and obeyed."¹¹⁴ If the possibility of the fulfillment of the individual's sensuous subjectivity is abstractly negated with no hope for fulfillment, the subject comes to identify with the powers enforcing this negation and envy those who appear to violate the taboo enforced by these powers.

For our present purposes, we need not affirm this thesis regarding displacement. We outline it simply to note that for Horkheimer rational judgments regarding self-preservation fundamentally involve the deferral and sublimation of desires. Thus Horkheimer wishes to argue in "Authoritarianism and the Family Today" that a past form of the family shaped its members to reflect upon the deferral of sensuous desire in a rational manner which held forth the possibility of future realization, whereas late modern families acclimate their members to understand self-preservation as an activity requiring the brute suppression of desire. This claim by Horkheimer is easily misunderstood. For instance, Lohmann notes that "heteronomy," for Horkheimer, "means preventing or sublimating ... [sensual impulses, drives, and immediate

¹¹⁴ Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947; repr., New York: Continuum, 2003), 113 (cf. 116-117).

inclinations] for the sake of other goals.”¹¹⁵ But Horkheimer does not equate the necessity of repression itself with heteronomy. The question he raises is rather whether repression is rationally related to eventual fulfillment for a subject. Forced repression that is not chosen by the subject with the goal of fulfillment in view is thus heteronomous, not repression *per se*.

The late modern subject, notes Horkheimer, comes to accept that the justification for practices does not reside in its rational judgment regarding the utility of certain kinds of subordination for the eventual realization of its self-interest, but rather in the immediate strength of the forces supporting the practice. Such subjects “are never rationally reconciled to civilization.” Rather, “they bow to it, secretly accepting the identity of reason and domination, of civilization and the ideal, however much they may shrug their shoulders.”¹¹⁶ It is not *that* the authority of the father is being eroded that disturbs Horkheimer. Rather, it is the fact that the family unit and the authority of the father still exist as a forced reality, but in a distorted form no longer connected to the rational judgments of its members.

It is in this context that Horkheimer’s claims about the relation of paternal authority to “moral autonomy” need to be interpreted. In the household economy, individuals recognize that their own well-being hinges on the economic success of the family unit. In this quite limited sense, they had a kind of “solidarity,” insofar as the individual recognized the family’s various particular interests and projects as reflective of their own self-interest. The preservation of the individual was thus consonant with the interests of its family, its social whole *en miniature*. It is regarding this context, a context in which corporate solidarity and instrumental self-interest *coincide*, that Horkheimer notes, “In earlier times a loving imitation of the self-reliant, prudent man, devoted to his duty, was

¹¹⁵ Lohmann, “The Failure of Self Realization,” 394,

¹¹⁶ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 113.

the source of moral autonomy in the individual.”¹¹⁷ In the context of a contrast between this period and a later form of instrumental reasoning, “moral autonomy” is thus not intended to signify an abstract embrace of substantive values *per se*, nor does it reference a value detached from instrumental concerns. The loving embrace by the child of the perspective of the father does indeed signify its embrace of the well-being of the family as an end-in-itself. But this embrace is understood by the child to be consonant with a judgment regarding its own instrumental self-interest. Horkheimer thus does not wish to imply that whereas in a previous historical moment the father’s authority was internalized for substantive reasons, it is now internalized for instrumental reasons. For solidarity is not put at odds by him with self-preservation. His fundamental concern is with contrasting two different ways of pursuing instrumental concerns, not with contrasting instrumental concern with the concern for substantive ends.

The sensuous self-interest of the particular agent is no longer identified as consonant with a solidaric whole; indeed, Horkheimer notes, the individual no longer makes a judgment regarding how its particular interests and concerns are reflected in a social organism at all. Rather than a judgment that the deferral of immediate gratification is worthwhile for the sake of the future realization of such ends, self-preservation has become a reflexive adaptation to powers understood by the subject as “givens” lying beyond the exercise of reason. Or as Horkheimer puts it in another essay, the meaning of the pursuit of self-preservation itself thus changes,

The unity of individual life has been a social rather than a natural one. When the social mechanisms which made for this unity are weakened as they are today, the individual’s concern for his self-preservation changes its meaning. What previously served to promote man’s development ... living through memory and foresight, pleasure in oneself and others, narcissism as well as love, are losing their content.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family,” 388.

¹¹⁸ Horkheimer, “End of Reason,” 36.

The unity of the individual, Horkheimer notes, is not constituted by a brute biological pursuit of survival. Such “natural” needs are always already socially mediated, and it is this fragile and contingent mediation that structures what the activity of self-preservation comes to mean for the subject. In a previous form of life, the pursuit of self-preservation was indistinguishable for the subject from a judgment regarding the unique value which the history and intimate relations within the family had for the subject. As an individual, the subject’s preservation related not only to its role in the productive capacities of the home, but also to its loyalties and the hopes it held in common with the particular others making up the whole. Self-preservation was thus tied intimately to a particular experience of solidarity and was mediated as one end (the pursuit of physical survival) by a concern for the realization of other ends arising from social solidarity (held in common with one’s spouse, children, siblings, parents, etc.).¹¹⁹ Yet, Horkheimer emphasizes, the social practice of self-preservation is no longer mediated for the individual by a reflection on its particular historical past as a thread in the tapestry of a household (“memory”), nor by reflections regarding the future preservation of the members of this household (“foresight”). If the repression of immediate gratification required for self-preservation no longer has a genetic connection to the possibility of the realization of future ends held in common with others making up the social whole, but rather is understood simply as an exercise in adapting to ends determined opaquely by heteronomous forces, then the meaning of self-preservation has indeed qualitatively changed for the subject.

Horkheimer thus offers an empirical analysis, not of the *triumph* of pure “instrumental” reasoning over pure “substantive” concerns, but of the evolution of the

¹¹⁹ Benjamin’s portrayal of the choice of the bourgeois son to imitate the father in “Authority and the Family Revisited,” as “a renunciation of gratification in favor of future power” (52) misses the crucial role solidarity plays in Horkheimer’s account. The son defers gratification in favor, not of brute power, but of a future realization of particular ends held in common with others within the family.

subject's way of reasoning regarding its own self-preservation. Whereas once the individual recognized, if only implicitly, that its "self-preservation [could] be achieved only in a supra-individual order, that is to say, through social solidarity,"¹²⁰ at present the consonance between individual interests and the goals held in solidarity with others as ends-in-themselves is thrown into question. Indeed, the relation between the two is no longer consciously reflected upon by the individual, and self-preservation thus takes the form of mere adaptation to natural givens, a repression and not sublimation of desire, "Since the subjugation of nature, in and outside of man, goes on without a meaningful motive, nature is not really transcended or reconciled but merely repressed."¹²¹ In this passage from *Eclipse* Horkheimer does not argue that the subjugation of "nature" is itself avoidable or even a moral problem to be resolved. Rather, he presumes a counterfactual in which natural instinct may in fact be "subjugated" by a reasoning subject in terms of "a meaningful motive" and thereby "reconciled." The problem he wishes to diagnose by his discussion of the suppression of nature is thus not the use of the faculty of theoretical reason, but – quite the contrary – the lack of reasoned judgment regarding self-renunciation, and its mere acceptance on the basis of (supposed) natural givens.

3. The relation of empirical study to the critique of instrumental reason

A picture of changing habits of reasoning emerges from Horkheimer's descriptions of the family which frames the reparative concern of his late theory. In his reflections on the maternal relation, Horkheimer notes that the subject is losing its capacity to judge particular experiences as ends-in-themselves on the basis of its sensuous experience. Thus the question of how an end-in-itself comes to be taken by this subject as fitting in relation to its sensuous experience or how the interested individual comes to recognize the end as an end for it is lost. Similarly, in his reflections on the paternal, Horkheimer

¹²⁰ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 176.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

notes that the subject is losing its capacity to judge the deferrals and suppressions of gratification required for self-preservation in terms of a possible future satisfaction which it comes to identify as self-chosen. Such repression is rather taken as an inevitable necessity, unattached to reflection or the future possibility of sublimation. Thus the question of how the particular self-preservation of *this* subject might be realized in a form it judges to be adequate is lost. In each case, what is critiqued is the divorce of the theoretical and reflective patterns of inference from the judgment of the individual made on the basis of its sensuous experience. Horkheimer's ultimate interest, as we will see, is thus not to set one form of reasoning against the other but to critique a qualitative way that both kinds of judgment have been altered as the practice of reasoning has increasingly become disconnected from the self-conscious judgment of embodied subjects.

For the theorist, notes Horkheimer in *Eclipse*, the task is thus to examine the historical "development" of the "cleavage" between the two as a symptom of a more basic abstraction of judgment from sensuous experience,¹²² in order to illustrate that the opposition between the two in its present form is not in-itself an a-temporal necessity but is dependent upon concrete changes in historical and social practices. Thus the theorist prepares "in the intellectual realm" for the possibility of "the reconciliation of the two in reality."¹²³ Horkheimer does insist, it is true, that the two forms of reasoning have always stood in vital tension "in civilization as we have known it so far."¹²⁴ Yet insofar as this cleavage has a contingent historical genesis, he does not set this history over against the possibility that the two may be related by agents in the future in a way that better approximates reconciliation.

¹²² Ibid., 175.

¹²³ Ibid., 174.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 176.

In Horkheimer's late work, he terms the abstraction of the practice of judgment from the sensuous experience of subjects "instrumental reason." In what follows we will outline his therapeutic diagnosis of the alienation arising because of instrumental reasoning, before turning to examine his understanding of how liturgical communities of faith respond to this alienation.

Chapter 4

The loss of intelligible concepts and the possibility of sublation:
The consequence of instrumental reasoning

Horkheimer's mature theorizing, from *Eclipse of Reason* (1947) until his death, is often characterized by interpreters as speculative, due to his governing concern with "intelligible" concepts. By "intelligible," I mean concepts that are not products of sense experience. There are various examples of this kind of concept one might draw from the history of philosophy, such as:

- (1): Ideas that are understood to be self-evident to reason (i.e. the innate ideas of the rationalists; Kant's portrayal of the moral law as a "fact" of reason in the second critique),
- (2): Ideas that arise from the wild exercise of the imagination (i.e. Schopenhauer's will),
- (3): Ideas that are the product of an inference from what is experienced to that which is not an object of possible experience (i.e. Aquinas' five ways).

"Intelligible" concepts may thus be broadly contrasted with "empirical" ones. The portrayal of Horkheimer as fixated on the former fits the idea, which we have noted repeatedly in the secondary literature, that he turns away from a concern with concrete empirical research towards untethered metaphysics in his mature work.¹

Upon initial investigation, this portrayal of Horkheimer's concern is not implausible. In *Eclipse*, for instance, he appeals to the ideals of Enlightenment rationalism to justify his critique. Similarly, essays and interviews from the remaining decades of his life reflect extensively on Schopenhauer's metaphysics as well as various theological topics. I shall demonstrate, however, that this presentation of Horkheimer's late critical theory presumes a

¹ Note stages 3 and 4 in the Introduction for examples of this interpretation.

qualitative difference between the “empirical” and the “intelligible” that he wishes to challenge and thus misunderstands radically the central concern animating his late work.

Despite critiquing the idea that materialism is primarily a doctrine regarding the nature of reality, Horkheimer readily admits, in his early essay “Materialism and Metaphysics” (1933), that the materialist assumes claims about the totality which do not arise from the discrete experience of any particular object.² What distinguishes the materialist is not *that* she assumes such claims, but rather that such claims only become items of self-conscious interest for her insofar as they are related to the practical action of subjects.

To the extent that materialists have in fact formulated such definitive statements as that everything real is material, these statements play an entirely different role in their teaching than in that of their opponents. ... In most nonmaterialist kinds of thought, insights become more meaningful and have greater implications as they become more general, comprehensive, and definitive statements of principle. It cannot be said that for the materialist the exact opposite is true (this would be the case only in extreme and therefore metaphysical nominalism). But it is true that the measure in which general points of view become decisive for action depends on the agent’s concrete situation at any given moment.³

As we hinted in chapter 1, if the loss of intelligible concepts has in fact impacted the self-understanding of subjects, this would be a situation in which one might expect Horkheimer’s “materialist” to sit up and take note. I wish to argue, in a careful investigation of his late work, that his reflections upon intelligible concepts are best understood in this light: his concern is not incompatible with, and is in fact framed by him in terms of, his account of thought as a practical form of inquiry. I will begin by noting two

² Note the discussion of this point in Chapter 1, section 2.2.

³ Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et. al. (New York: Continuum, 1999), 19-20. Compare this with his later discussion of the role of “ideals” in materialist thought: 45-46. In his later reflections on “Ernst Simmel and Freudian Philosophy” (1948), examined in chapter 2, section 2.3., Horkheimer assumes that inquiry is necessarily conducted in a context which assumes such intelligible ends.

typical ways of interpreting Horkheimer's mature treatment of intelligible concepts, before developing this alternative account.

Second generation critical theorists have argued that Horkheimer is inhibited in his appeal to intelligible concepts by his inability to consistently jettison his early critique of metaphysics. For instance, in his interpretive essay on *Eclipse* in the critical companion *On Max Horkheimer*, Georg Lohmann notes,

Horkheimer sees [the concept of reason] preserved, in however distorted a form, in the 'great ideals of civilization—justice, equality, freedom'; 'they are ... the only formulated testimonies we possess.' Philosophy is to secure for itself the rational potential of these ideas; though it denies their claim to 'ultimate and eternal truth,' it grants 'that the basic cultural ideas have truth values.' This view is contradictory. If in critically examining the relation between ideal and reality philosophy can 'transcend them', then it may do so only when, on the side of the ideals, its criterion of truth is justified. The 'basic difference between the ideal and the real' characteristic of this 'true philosophy' is at the same time a relapse into metaphysics.⁴

In appealing to the "truth value" of intelligible concepts, Lohmann argues, Horkheimer assumes a basis for judgment that is beyond the vicissitudes of given historical experience. Yet he aporetically denies the "ultimate" unconditionality of such concepts that is entailed by this appeal.

Horkheimer's appeal is further complicated, it is often noted, by a simultaneous commitment to diametrically opposed presentations of the intelligible. Habermas thus argues that Horkheimer's late thought is characterized not merely by an inconsistent appeal to the intelligible; it may be fairly portrayed, further, as the advocacy of contradictory

⁴ Georg Lohmann, "The Failure of Self Realization," trans. Kenneth Baynes and John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, eds. Seyla Benhabib et. al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 407, quoting Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 182-183. For variations of this argument, note: Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 350; Stefan Breuer, "The Long Friendship," 265; Hans Joas, "An Underestimated Alternative: America and the Limits of 'Critical Theory,'" trans. Jeremy Gaines, in *Pragmatism and Social Critique*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 82; Peter U. Hohendahl, "The Dialectic of Enlightenment Revisited: Habermas' Critique of the Frankfurt School," *New German Critique*, no. 35 (Spring/Summer 1985): 13.

presentations of the intelligible. Horkheimer appears to blend a commitment to Enlightenment moral ideals (on the one hand) with a totalizing pessimism regarding reason (on the other). This duality, notes Habermas, “could initially be taken to mean that in his late philosophy, an unresolved tension appears between motifs from two different phases, as if the more practical impulses of the 1930’s were fighting off the historical vision of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.” Yet Habermas concludes that this view is “too simple.”⁵ Horkheimer does not embrace Enlightenment ideals and a totalizing pessimism in open contradiction. Rather, he is unable finally to embrace *either*, “The late philosophy is governed by a dilemma: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* cannot be last word, but it bars the way back to the materialism of the 1930s.”⁶

This abandonment of the practical ideals of Enlightenment reason, Habermas will note, by no means turns Horkheimer away from a concern with intelligible concepts as such. Rather, Horkheimer’s turn to theology is motivated by a continuing search for a stable standpoint from which to critique instrumental reason in the wake of the failure of the Enlightenment,

From what one can gather, the older Horkheimer did not return to religious faith, but religion now appears as the only agency that—if it could command assent—would permit distinguishing between truth and falsity, morality and immorality. It alone could still grant life a meaning that transcends mere self-preservation. ...

That Horkheimer should invoke theology, even if only hypothetically, is only logical once the philosophy of history has not only lost its historical basis but, extended into a totalizing critique of reason, threatens to destroy its own foundations. The older Horkheimer does not which to accept this, though he sees no way out.⁷

I shall leave to the side the constructive significance of Horkheimer’s invocation of theology and return to it in the final two chapters. At present, I wish to demonstrate that

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer’s Work” in *On Max Horkheimer*, 52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 61. Habermas concludes that Horkheimer’s theory was thus “twice-broken” (63).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

characterizing Horkheimer's reflections on the intelligible concepts of the Enlightenment as an inconsistent attempt to ground the normativity of his critique (Lohmann), or as a confused rejection arising from a negative philosophy of history (Habermas), both misunderstand the intention of Horkheimer's mature work.

Horkheimer often describes his late critical theory, we shall see, as the task of "preserving" historical concepts of the intelligible. If intelligible concepts are understood as products of "pure" reason (inferences from empirical conditions to the unconditioned, e.g. theological metaphysics), or as products of "pure" intuition (imagined experiences of that which underlies all empirical conditions, e.g. Schopenhauer's will), then to speak of "preserving" such concepts is nonsense. One may speak of "preserving" concepts only if they are the sorts of items that may in fact be lost. On the other hand, if concepts of the intelligible are practices of description which are learned socially, one may indeed speak of them being "lost" or "preserved," insofar as they continue to have significance as actions for members of a given form of life.

Horkheimer's thesis is that changes in the habits of reasoning learned in the family have fundamentally altered how subjects reason regarding the intelligible. This alteration, he argues, inhibits the continued use of such concepts. In itself, this would not be worthy of examination, for historical concepts often fall out of use or take on qualitatively distinct meanings in different historical moments. Yet a historical analysis of the way changes in reasoning regarding the intelligible have affected modern subjects reveals that a deep alienation results from this loss, and Horkheimer wishes to address this experience of alienation.

By way of introduction, I shall outline this thesis regarding the loss of intelligible concepts and the consequent alienation of subjects in relation to Horkheimer's empirical studies, and then examine how it is reflected in the form of his argument in *Eclipse*. In the last chapter, we noted that Horkheimer's studies convince him that modern subjects are increasingly acclimated to minimize the relationship between their particular experience as social embodied agents and their theoretical and reflective habits of reasoning. This separation between experience and judgment, Horkheimer will note in *Eclipse*, is reflected in two opposing kinds of reasoning about intelligible concepts. On the one hand, positivism (an expression of theoretical reasoning) abstractly negates such concepts as empty, insofar as they describe teleological wholes that are not objects of possible experience. On the other, various revivals of metaphysics (expressions of reflective reasoning) affirm the content of intelligible concepts, yet understand this content in a way that separates it, as an immediate intuition of the whole, from the subject's experience of empirical conditions. In both cases judgment regarding the adequacy of intelligible concepts is divorced from a subject's particular experience of the social practices it inhabits. "Positivism" and "metaphysical revivals" thus reflect Horkheimer's empirical studies on the family: the former describes the subject's increasing inability to contemplate the fittedness between its own self-interest and the purposes of the social whole, the latter the subject's inability to judge other ends-in-themselves in accordance with its own sensuous experience.

This results in a fundamental dissonance in the self-understanding of modern subjects. In early modern life, Horkheimer notes in his essays on the family, subjects expected to be able to pose the self-reflexive questions: "do the social practices I inhabit stand in continuity with my self-interest" (in the case of theoretical reasoning), or "with my desire for an object

as an end-in-itself” (in the case of reflective reasoning)? Put otherwise, subjects did not take either the extrinsic purposes of the social whole or the value of ends-in-themselves to be self-evident.⁸ Yet they are increasingly unable to pose these questions, and thus to recognize the ends they pursue as reflections of their self-conscious willing. This inability, Horkheimer will argue, is intimately related to a failure to preserve the significance of intelligible concepts in modern life. Moderns need an account of the relation between experience and such concepts if they are to judge the ends they pursue as reflecting (or failing to reflect) their own self-understanding. Yet “positivism” names a sensibility that denies that the content of such concepts has *any* relation to experience, whereas revivals of metaphysics leave no room for the experience of the subject in their formulation and justification.

Setting aside for the moment the substantive argument Horkheimer wishes to make regarding such types of reasoning in *Eclipse*, let us make an initial observation regarding how Horkheimer’s concern is reflected in its form. Horkheimer does not set metaphysics over against positivism in programmatic statements of his critique of instrumental reasoning, but portrays the two as intimately related. In discussing the relationship between positivism and the neo-Thomist conception of the “natural law” in *Eclipse*, Horkheimer notes,

The positivist command to conform to facts ... is not so different from the call to obey reality as interpreted by religious institutions. ... Both schools are heteronomous in character. One tends to replace autonomous reason by the automatism of streamlined methodology, the other by the authority of a dogma.⁹

⁸ Note our discussion in Ch. 3, section 2. This formulation of Horkheimer’s concern draws on Terry Pinkard’s reflections in *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Pinkard notes that for Hegel, the purpose of “the modern project” is to show that “the enterprise of self-grounding goes all the way down” (270). A very similar concern occupies a central place in Horkheimer’s own reflections as we will see.

⁹ Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947; repr., New York: Continuum, 2003), 91.

Horkheimer thus draws a parallel between a particular understanding of “facts” that equates their meaning with the results yielded by the scientific method and an understanding of “reality” which equates its meaning with the claims of the church regarding the natural law. Both of these kinds of claims are “heteronomous,” insofar as each take “facts” or “reality” as givens that should be accepted by subjects apart from an exercise of judgment made on the basis of their own particular experience.¹⁰ Framing a similar parallel, he notes that the relationship between the modern sciences and humanities in the academy reflect that “truth” has been “split.” On the one hand, “the physical sciences are endowed with so called objectivity, but emptied of human content” (the products of the scientific method are thus not related to the judgment of a social embodied subject regarding reality). On the other, “the humanities preserve the human content, but only as ideology, at the expense of truth” (by “ideology,” Horkheimer refers to a value that is abstracted from the judgment of the subject made on the basis of its own experience).¹¹

The ubiquity of the claim regarding Horkheimer’s aporetic return to “metaphysics” notwithstanding, it is already clear that he did not view his argument in *Eclipse* simply as a critique of positivism in favor of metaphysics. In an unpublished letter to the editors of the *Philosophical Review* rebutting this charge, he forcefully insists, “In spite of my critiques of ‘subjective reason’ and its relapse into a second mythology ... I have never advocated a return to an even more mythological ‘objective reason’ borrowed from history,” and he concludes, “I have attacked enlightenment in the spirit of enlightenment, not of

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 81, where Horkheimer similarly contrasts his critical theory with “both the concept of values and the idea of the absolute validity of facts.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

obscurantism.”¹² While this claim to critique both positivism and metaphysics is often portrayed as nonsensical, I shall illustrate that it is meaningful when situated by Horkheimer’s concern for the preservation of intelligible concepts.

I will first outline Horkheimer’s understanding of the self-understanding and expectations of the modern subject, which he describes in relation to the Enlightenment political project (1). Then I will develop his diagnosis of the way the frustration of this project relates to a failure to preserve intelligible concepts in a form appropriate to modern life, resulting in the alienation of the subject (2). Finally, I will introduce his mature work as a reflection on another way of understanding such concepts, besides abstract negation (positivism) or a-historical reassertion (metaphysical revivals), by examining his portrayal of the task of critical theory as “preservation” (3).¹³ In the final two chapters, I will interpret his reflections on theology as a therapeutic attempt to preserve intelligible categories in a form adequate to the self-understanding of modern subjects.

1. The Enlightenment project

In explaining the Enlightenment project, Horkheimer begins with what he takes to be a tension between Kant’s insistence in his political writings that social life should to be structured in accordance with the goal of practical reason (the treatment of agents as ends-in-themselves), and his claim in the second critique that the “ought” presented in the

¹² Horkheimer, *A Life in Letters: Selected Correspondences*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 271. Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*, 332, notes that guarding against this construal of *Eclipse* was a concern Horkheimer shared with Adorno. James Schmidt goes so far as to suggest in “The *Eclipse of Reason* and the End of the Frankfurt School in America,” *New German Critique* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 67, fn. 80, that Horkheimer may have expressed discomfort with his publisher’s summary of his argument for this reason.

¹³ If I am correct, Horkheimer should thus be placed amongst a coterie of modern Jewish philosophers interested in developing what Steven Kepnes terms (following Paul Ricoeur) in *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7, a modern “‘hermeneutic of retrieval’ of philosophy, human subjectivity and meaning.”

categorical imperative implies “can.” The latter insistence implies that one may infer from the articulation of a categorical imperative the concrete possibility of its empirical realization, so that the latter is merely contingent upon an act of the will. Yet this appears to Horkheimer to stand in no little tension with the former concern in Kant’s political writings, for they suppose that structures characterizing the social whole inhibit the exercise of this will. To the extent that there are social preconditions necessary to allow subjects to exercise their will in accord with practical reason and these preconditions remain unrealized, the formal imperative supposes an implicit substantive commitment to bring about a society where the categorical imperative may be practiced. Thus Horkheimer notes, “The moment one infers—as Kant did—that the world should be arranged so that everyone *can* act like this, something has been read into the principle that isn’t there.”¹⁴ Kant’s political work thus admits a fissure between the imperative and the absence of the preconditions that allow its realization.¹⁵

Horkheimer interprets the intelligible postulates of practical reason as an attempt to bridge this fissure. In the present social whole, Kant admits, an individual may well be forced to act against its own happiness when it submits to the imperatives of practical reason because the social incentives which situate individual willing do not always accord with treating others as ends. For Kant, the reconciliation between the individual and its social whole is thus necessarily deferred onto an intelligible horizon. The possibility of

¹⁴ Horkheimer, “On Kant’s Moral Philosophy” (1961-1962), in *Dawn and Decline: Notes, 1926-1931 & 1950-1969*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 199, his emphasis. This late claim parallels the initial move in Horkheimer’s early Kant critique, “Materialism and Morality” (1933) in *Between Philosophy and Social Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 25, “The categorical imperative ... runs up against the impossibility of its own meaningful realization.”

¹⁵ Horkheimer thus concludes, “What determines how the world would have to look for that kind of action to occur? ... Even in moral philosophy, the consequence is really already assumed: you must treat man as an end because the world in which everyone can act that way is just as much an end as man” (“On Kant’s Moral Philosophy,” 199).

future happiness allowed by the postulates, notes Horkheimer, contains an implicit judgment regarding the inadequacy of the temporal empirical conditions which inhibit its realization, “The postulate of a transcendental world is identical, in [Kant’s] philosophy, with the judgment on the immanent world.”¹⁶ God, freedom, and immortality allow Kant to suggest that the experience of a fissure between the particular agent and its social whole can be soothed by a discursive interior act of the intellect, the idea that happiness may eventually come to those who act in accord with the moral law. Yet for Horkheimer only “life,” the concrete activity of subjects, is able to close the fissure, “What mediates between the two [the intelligible and empirical worlds] ... is not faith alone, nor interiority but human life.”¹⁷ One cannot equate the cognitive reconciliation of a fragmented life in thought with its actual reconciliation in reality.¹⁸

The fact that Kant refuses to conceive of the rational reconciliation between the individual and the social whole in terms other than such intellection, does, however, signal a decisive step beyond the scholastics. For the latter conceived of this reconciliation as already existing. By contrast, for Kant,

It is not in the encompassing order that the unity of reason and reality can evidence themselves. Only in the cognitive effort of the intellect, in the nature and quality of living beings, in art, can unity, appropriateness and perfection unfold. And it is therefore consistent that the step from the imperative to action, the concept of mankind as end in contrast to mere means, indeed the concept of an end, should also not be consistent and valid. If it were, Kant’s philosophy would lead back to Scholasticism, to a time when the world seemed in order.¹⁹

¹⁶ Horkheimer, “The Concept of Man” (1957), *Critique of Instrumental Reason: Lectures and Essays since the End of World War II* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cf. Horkheimer, “The Social Function of Philosophy” (1939), in *Critical Theory*, 269, “Contradictions in thought cannot be resolved by purely theoretical reflection. That requires an historical development beyond which we cannot leap in thought. Knowledge is bound up not only with psychological and moral conditions, but also with social conditions.”

¹⁹ Horkheimer, “On Kant’s Moral Philosophy,” 199.

Although they allow only artificial reconciliation, Kant's postulates continue to portray the realization of happiness as deferred. For Horkheimer, this is both symptomatic of the continuing dissatisfaction experienced by modern subjects, as well as an expression of hope regarding the possibility of a self-directed human future as a task yet to be accomplished.

What he terms in the following passage as "the Kantian conclusion" is a striving after the social preconditions which would allow for the consistent practice of the categorical imperative, preconditions that would enable the task of the Enlightenment, the recognition of subjects as ends-in-themselves, to proceed. Yet Horkheimer notes that this Kantian conclusion is in danger of being lost,

In the historical period after Kant the material conditions needed for a rational administration of the world improved to a degree undreamt of. Yet those who inherited these improved conditions are far from drawing the Kantian conclusion. ... In the century of Enlightenment free thought was the force that knocked the solid supports of stability from under institutions which bad conscience had driven to adopt terroristic methods; it was the force that gave the bourgeoisie its self-awareness. In our own time, on the contrary, the feeling is abroad that free thought is helpless. Mastery of nature has not brought man to self-realization, on the contrary, the status quo continues to exert its objective compulsion.²⁰

For the materialist, the Kantian hope has for its object the realization of a social goal, that the subject would recognize the social practices and institutions it inhabits as expressions of its will. Thought is a form of self-consciousness that enables the subject to realize this goal. Using Hegelian language, Horkheimer terms this a commitment to the "self-realization" of the subject. In seeking this, he notes, the seminal advocates of the Enlightenment subjected all claims to the natural "objectivity" of social practices to critical evaluation, in order, as he puts it in an earlier essay, to "impregnate with human purpose those relationships of daily

²⁰ Horkheimer, "Concept of Man," 3-4.

life that are almost blindly created and maintained.”²¹ However, its inheritors “are far from drawing the Kantian conclusion.”

In late modern society, the fulfillment of authentic “man” is thus typically discussed apart from the concrete analysis of the relation between a subject and its empirical practices. For instance, Horkheimer notes, existentialists define humanity by a set of universal traits abstracted from socio-historical analysis, and the goal sought by their theorizing is disconnected from the political vision of the Enlightenment. They couple the goal of personal authenticity with a notion of transformation that requires inward resolve but not a change in social practices,

Where the word “man” ... is still used in a more pregnant sense, it does not imply the rights of mankind. It does not stand for a theory of reason such as once was based on the unshakeable belief that a just world could still be brought into existence. The word “man” no longer expresses the power of the subject who can resist the status quo, however heavily it may weigh upon him. Quite differently than in the context of critical philosophy, to speak of man today is to engage in the endless question of the ground of man and, since, in ontological philosophy ground supplies direction, in the endless quest for an image of man that will provide orientation and guidance. ... We must note, however, that when man is regarded as a spiritual being and not as a biological species, he is always a definite individual, not the dimensionless abstraction, distilled from the individuals of every social stratum, class, country, and age.²²

What Horkheimer terms “ontological philosophy” fixates on an intractable question, the “ground of man” lying behind social practices, which may “direct” the individual ethical life. Yet the idea that all human reflection is oriented around the individual actualization of authenticity in accord with this ground ignores the way thought as an activity is situated by social practices for the “definite individual” of a particular “social stratum, class, country, and age.” Existentialism, as we shall see, is but a particular example for Horkheimer of a

²¹ Horkheimer, “Social Function of Philosophy,” 260.

²² Horkheimer, “Concept of Man,” 4-5. This passage parallels precisely Horkheimer’s earlier critique of *lebensphilosophie* in “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics” (1937), in *Critical Theory*, 137-138.

broader tendency to disregard the relationship between socio-historical experience and judgment. This disregard, he argues, is held in common by late modern forms of thought as wildly divergent as positivist elevations of the scientific method and modern revivals of metaphysics. The problem with such thought, he insists, is that it is incapable of addressing the alienation subject's experience due to their failure to achieve self-determination in the social practices they inhabit, thus the failure to achieve self-satisfaction in terms of a fundamental goal defining their own understanding as moderns. With this in mind, we shall now turn to examine the central substantive claims of *Eclipse*.

2. The declensions of the Enlightenment

2.1. The positivist declension:

Theoretical reasoning and the eclipse of subjectivity

Horkheimer insists that the contemporary inability to reflect upon the subject in positivist thought is not intrinsically tied to the observational method of its empiricist forbearers. In an early essay setting forth the basis for his later critique of positivism which we have already examined, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics" (1937), he thus prefaces his criticism by praising the early empiricists for their critique of the social role of intelligible concepts,

In its most flourishing period, positivism did not limit its attack to metaphysical ideas about the beyond, but criticized organicist theories of the state and society as well. Early in its history it criticized the fetishistic concept of the state together with the illusory concept of God as things which hindered the development of man. This clarification is entered on the credit side of modern positivism.²³

This assessment of the early empiricists does not change in Horkheimer's late essays. A quarter of a century later he notes, "Empiricism and the materialism related to it imply criticism, not only of the dominant philosophy and the original perfection of things which it

²³ Horkheimer, "Latest Attack," 139.

had proclaimed, but also of the conditions of the world, of social and political reality.”²⁴

The progenitors of positivism continue to be significant, for Horkheimer, insofar as they pursued the Enlightenment political project, the desire for the self-realization of the subject and the critique of heteronomous social forces that hinder this. The early empiricist emphasis on the relation of the justification of claims to experience was congruent with this project, for it forced the legitimating claims of semi-feudal institutions before the tribunal of the sensuous experience of those inhabiting the institutions.

In contrast to this critique, which presupposes, even if implicitly, a commitment to particular emancipatory ends, later empiricists embody a purely theoretical nominalism which negates the notion of teleology as such. In its subsequent historical iterations, positivism thus loses its concern with the realization of the Enlightenment political project: whereas the French *encyclopédistes* had critiqued the portrayal of the intelligible marshaled by institutional authorities to suppress the subject, empiricism in the hands of Comte, with its critique of abstract universals like “justice, equality, and fraternity,” became a tool for insulating such repressive constellations from scrutiny,

The eighteenth century philosophy which, defying the funeral pyres for books and people, put the fear of death into infamy, joined forces with it under Bonaparte. Finally, the apologetic school of Comte usurped the succession to the uncompromising *encyclopédistes*, extending the hand of friendship to all those whom the latter had opposed. Such metamorphoses of critique into affirmation do not leave the theoretical content untouched; its truth evaporates.²⁵

In *Eclipse* Horkheimer assumes this historical background, asserting concisely that empiricism “abstracted from its social context and human goal becomes merely an illusion

²⁴ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer Today” (1961), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 72.

²⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944), trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xv. Cf. Horkheimer’s nearly identical analysis in “Too Abstract” (1957-1958), in *Dawn and Decline*, 163.

of motion, the bad infinity of mechanical repetition.”²⁶ If the self-realization of the empirical subject was to be brought about through a frank reckoning which compared the claims of institutions with the sense-experience of subjects, the flattening of this “human goal” leads to observation for its own sake, the “illusion of motion.”

Developing this argument with greater precision, Horkheimer notes that for early empiricists the relation between subjects and institutions is revealed by controlled observation, but the results of the method of observation are not themselves equated with truth. Given the practical context in which empiricism emerged, “truth” referred for early theorists to a relation of satisfaction between the subject and the institutions it inhabited. The method of observation does not, of course, yield such satisfaction, but provides knowledge that can direct the subject towards it. Later positivists, by contrast, equate the results of the scientific method with truth itself, “Instead of interrupting the machine-like functioning of research, the mechanisms of fact-finding, verification, classification, et cetera, and reflecting on their meaning and relation to truth, the positivists reiterate that science proceeds by observation and describe circumstantially how it functions.”²⁷ Thus instead of recognizing observation as a self-conscious attempt to illuminate an already existing relationship between a subject and its social practices in order to direct the activity of subjects, the concepts yielded by observation are understood as representing reality. By contrast, notes Horkheimer, philosophy that is faithful to the Enlightenment project should not accept an equation of the outcome of formal procedures with “truth.” It should rather direct and synthesize the implications of practices of observation in relation to the historical goal sought by the original empiricists, the self-realization of the subject. He concludes with

²⁶ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 133-134.

²⁷ Ibid., 76. Cf. parallel claims: 71, 73, 79, 82.

no little irony that positivists have departed from the original spirit of the empiricists, “By compliantly making science the theory of philosophy, positivism disavows the spirit of science itself.”²⁸

Horkheimer concludes these reflections by noting that a theorist cannot avoid the necessary relation between contexts of inquiry and formalized practices of observation when defining what constitutes “truth.” The claim that “observation is the proper guarantee of truth,” he notes, cannot itself be verified by observation and thus involves a “vicious circle.”²⁹ In order to avoid this, one must have reference to a historical context that can delimit when observation counts as truth for the inquiring subject in terms of projects and desires it has taken in hand. In postulating a principle that lies beyond any relation to the experience of an embodied subject yet is proclaimed as self-evident in its immediacy, positivists simply rehearse the mistake of various metaphysicians who attempt to appeal behind historical practices to an intuitive self-evident immediacy,

The *impasse* into which the ultimate justification of the positivist principle of empirical verification leads is an argument against the positivists only because they dub every other philosophical principle dogmatic and irrational. While other dogmatists at least try to justify their principles on the basis of what they call revelation, intuition, or primary evidence, the positivists try to avoid the fallacy by using such methods naively and denouncing those who practice them deliberately.³⁰

While positivism and metaphysical revivals may be wildly different kinds of thought, Horkheimer notes, they both assume criterion abstracted from historical contexts of inquiry as self-evident immediacies. The theorist concerned with realizing the Enlightenment project, by contrast, is interested not in positing an abstracted immediacy which delimits

²⁸ Ibid., 74.

²⁹ Ibid., 76.

³⁰ Ibid., 76-77, his emphasis. Cf. the parallel claim at 85.

what can count as truth no matter the context, but rather with tracing the truth of existing social practices as judged by an interested, historical subject.

When Horkheimer thus turns to articulate his alternative to positivism, he does not do so by setting speculative philosophy over against empirical inquiry, but rather by articulating a different way of understanding the relation of observational practices to truth,

If science is to be the authority that stands firm against obscurantism—and in demanding this the positivists continue the great tradition of humanism and the Enlightenment—philosophers must set up a criterion for the true nature of science. Philosophy must formulate the concept of science in a way that expresses human resistance to the threatening relapse into mythology and madness, rather than further such a relapse by formalizing science and conforming it to the requirements of the existing practice. To be the absolute authority, science must be justified as an intellectual principle, not merely deduced from empirical procedures and then made absolute truth on the basis of dogmatic criteria of scientific success.³¹

The key premise of the passage is that a practice of observation “must be justified as an intellectual principle, not merely deduced from empirical procedures.” A way it may be justified, Horkheimer notes, is by its ability to realize a historically situated project, the self-determination of the historical subject. Thus “the concept of science” itself must be related to a concern for “human resistance” against various heteronomous forces, and precisely this, Horkheimer notes, was part of the self-understanding of early empiricists who employed observation in terms of a social project, as part of “the great tradition of humanism and the Enlightenment.” It becomes particularly clear in this context how misguided it is to interpret Horkheimer’s work as a preference for philosophy over against empirical inquiry. He contrasts, rather, two different ways of understanding the relation of scientific “observation” to “truth.” One equates the former with the latter and abstracts both from concrete contexts of inquiry while the other situates the meaning of both as

³¹ Ibid., 77.

conditioned by a broader historical project (in this case, the ends pursued by Enlightenment humanism).

Instead of either accepting or negating intelligible concepts *prima facie* in favor of scientific practices of observation, the theorist should recognize such concepts as implicit in the development of historical scientific practices themselves. Criticism intent on realizing the Enlightenment project should then be offered for the purpose of the self-determination of the subject, not as a critique of teleological concepts as such. In Horkheimer's delineation of the role of the philosopher, a proper concern with subjecting the intelligible justification of alienation to critical reflection is, of course, an aspect of such criticism. However, this determinate negation becomes abstract when teleology as such is negated.³²

2.2. The metaphysical declension:

Reflective reasoning and the eclipse of subjectivity

Modern subjects are alienated by the abstract negation of teleological concepts not simply because they mourn the loss of traditional metaphysics, but because this negation shakes the very foundations of the Enlightenment project itself. From his earliest writings Horkheimer is sensitive to this, noting in his lectures on the history of philosophy from the 1920s that "the advance of the intellectual efforts, which sought to capture reality free from all distortions (free from theology and metaphysics), left a meaningless, abstract, elemental material as residue behind." Thus, "ideals which had guided the early development of this society," such as "human dignity, morality, [and] freedom" appeared "at best imagined or even fictitious."³³ In response to this experience, a temptation is to search for a historical

³² Cf. Horkheimer's discussion of the role of the philosopher in chapter 2, section 2.3.

³³ Quoted from Horkheimer, *Nachgelassene Schriften, 1914-1931*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, vol. 10 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Tauschenbush, 1990), 319-320, in Abromeit, "Dialectic of Bourgeois Society," 193.

moment prior to the disenchantment and thus reassert historical practices of thinking related to pre-modern forms of life. However understandable such revivals may be, warns Horkheimer, they risk eliding the social and institutional reasons underlying changes in past forms of thought and the influence of such changes on the self-conception of modern subjects. The reason Horkheimer critiques such revivals is thus not the bare fact that they reassert intelligible concepts. Rather, it is because they reassert such concepts in a way not sensitive to the historical self-consciousness of modern subjects. He wishes to repair this, not by negating such historical concepts, but by illustrating how they might be preserved in a form adequate to this self-consciousness.

Horkheimer notes that justifications offered for pre-modern institutions contained an “element of coldness” which was insensitive to the suffering of many who inhabited them. For example, in “the harmonious cosmos” of medieval metaphysics, he notes, “personality [was] the microcosm corresponding to an immutable social and natural hierarchy.” Yet the supposed fittedness between the subject and reality reflected in the treatment of social roles as natural givens offered no voice to many who suffered. Modern institutions and the practices of reasoning which they facilitated arose at least in part as a historical response against this coldness, as the attempt to give subjects a voice in reflecting upon and determining the social forces shaping their life. Horkheimer embraces this narrative of the emergence of the modern subject in *Eclipse*,

Insistence upon any immutable order of the universe, implying a static view of history, precludes hope of a progressive emancipation of the subject from eternal childhood in both community and nature. The transition from objective to subjective reason was a necessary historical process.³⁴

³⁴ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 133.

Elsewhere, he explicitly relates this historical process to the way moderns conceive of the justification of social practices, “With the decline of the hierarchical order in the Renaissance, the certainty of a natural arrangement of humanity faded as well, and the form of social relations required justification.”³⁵ The modern notion that authority is a relation between subjects that must be justified to those subjects and not a self-evident natural arrangement is thus understood by Horkheimer as a political response to a form of alienation characterizing pre-modern life. One may, of course, question the historical narrative which moderns tell themselves about the emergence of their political institutions. Even so, Horkheimer wishes to note that any attempt to evaluate the significance of past metaphysical concepts for moderns should appreciate what is revealed about their self-understanding by this narrative: modern agents understand the development of their political practices as a response to the alienation of subjects in previous forms of life arising because of the conflation of social roles with natural exigencies.³⁶

Horkheimer notes that two prominent features of this self-understanding should be appreciated in particular. First, moderns consider their form of life to be a consistent culmination of a concern implicit in pre-modern societies. The modern idea that a social relationship between agents is self-consciously constituted and its continuation justified on the basis of the agents’ experience of the relation develops, Horkheimer argues, from a concern that is already evident in pre-modern accounts and which is reflected in the formulation of their conceptualizations of the intelligible. Second, moderns evaluate this

³⁵ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer and Society” (1955), trans. Todd Cronan, *Qui Parle* 15, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2004): 85.

³⁶ This account of the emergence of modern self-consciousness is common to the Western Marxist tradition and relies on Lukács’ pioneering critique of reification in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 83-222.

culmination as an advance. Self-conscious reflection regarding the relation between the justification of a practice and embodied experience is understood by them as a historical accomplishment of modern institutions, though one that is imperiled. It is precipitated by the dissatisfaction of past subjects in previous forms of life at their inability to consistently recognize their will in their social practices. It follows, for Horkheimer, that recognition of the self-consciousness of moderns need not require the negation of past conceptualizations of the intelligible. It does require, however, that the theorist examine and rearticulate the continuing significance of historical concepts of the intelligible in a form sensitive to this modern self-consciousness.

This is not the approach of metaphysical revivals. Instead of attempting the preservation of concepts in a form consistent with the modern concern with the subject's role in constituting its practices, revivals reassert past concepts *tell quel* as a panacea for disenchantment. A significant difference between pre-critical and modern forms of metaphysics may thus be noted: while for modern metaphysical revivals, teleology is known by the subject as an intuitive immediacy, such that "valid insight" regarding teleological wholes "must confine itself to the realm of the immediately given—the '*données immédiates de la conscience*,'" ³⁷ for the ancients intelligible wholes could not be known apart from a relation to the what we have termed the "sensuous experience" of subjects (experience inflected by the affects and projects of the subject). While pre-modern concepts contain an implicit account of the relation of their formulations to such experience, late modern revivals elide the relation and treat their conceptualizations as self-evident. In this, it bears repeating, metaphysical revivals mirror the positivist declension: both privilege a self-evident

³⁷ Horkheimer "The relation between psychology and sociology in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 8, no. 3 (1939): 437. Horkheimer references the metaphysics of Bergson.

immediacy of some sort over against the judgment of the subject arising from its embodied social experience.

2.2.1. The relation of the subject to the intelligible in pre-modern metaphysics

Horkheimer marshals numerous examples throughout the history of philosophy which he believes illustrate that pre-modern philosophy consistently expresses a tacit relationship between intelligible concepts and the social experience of subjects. His intent, it bears repeating, is not to present classical thought as an alternative to modern philosophy, but rather to illustrate a point regarding *contemporary* retrievals of metaphysics: such retrievals take a qualitatively distinct approach to the role of the subject in knowing than their pre-modern antecedents. In sharp contrast, he maintains that his own explanation of the preservation of such concepts contains a clear relation to the subject that makes both explicit and consistent what is penultimate and inconsistent in pre-modern accounts. Horkheimer thus wishes to claim that his account both stands in closer proximity to classical forms of thought than metaphysical revivals as well as that it completes what is only inconsistently implicit in these earlier accounts by virtue of its attention to the constitutive role of the subject.

A central case study he offers to illustrate this argument is the relation between medieval and neo-Thomism, the latter of which is his primary contemporary object of critique in *Eclipse*. The interpretation of the history of philosophy he develops is properly understood as a background which both illumines and is illumined by this particular case study. We will thus outline Horkheimer's broader historical narrative of the relation of the subject to intelligible concepts before turning to examine his analysis of neo-Thomism.

While “reason in its proper sense of *logos*, or *ratio*, has always been essentially related to the subject, his faculty of thinking,” notes Horkheimer, in pre-modern accounts “reason” also expresses an “absolute objectivity ultimately beyond, though related to, the faculty of thinking.”³⁸ Accounts of reason from antiquity thus necessarily involve a relation both to empirical subjectivity as well as to the meaning of the whole, which surpasses the discrete experiences of empirical conditions by situating them in terms of a purposive totality. The relation between the subject who knows and the intelligible that is known differs markedly, Horkheimer notes, in ancient and modern accounts. For the former, the existence of such wholes did not imply that knowledge of them was immediate or intuitively present to comprehension. Rather, such knowledge required the practice of dialectics, influenced both by the skill and affective desire of the seeker, “This structure is accessible to him who takes upon himself the effort of dialectical thinking, or, identically, who is capable of *eros*.”³⁹ Besides skill and affective desire, material well-being was also recognized as a prerequisite for philosophical reflection upon the intelligible.⁴⁰

This implicit relation is perhaps nowhere better portrayed, Horkheimer notes, than in the *Funeral Oration* of Pericles. While it is certainly the case that for Pericles, the *polis* “was both superior and antecedent to its citizens,” nevertheless “this predominance ... facilitated rather than hindered the rise of the individual: it effected a balance between ... individual freedom and communal welfare.”⁴¹ In the oration, a clear distinction is thus drawn between the citizen of unique skill and courage and the social totality his skill serves. Yet while the two are distinguished (thus the possibility of conflict remains), Pericles extols, not the

³⁸ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 6.

³⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁰ As Horkheimer notes in “The Social Function of Philosophy,” *Critical Theory*, 266-267.

⁴¹ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 130-131.

obsolescence of the citizen but the harmony between the two as the rational convergence that must be maintained if Athens is to prosper. Horkheimer does not believe that such harmony existed in the seamless way presented by such “Athenian ideology,”⁴² yet he concludes that the ideology is symptomatic of the fact that a relation between the happiness of the individual and the life of the whole is a goal recognized by antique reflection.

In reflecting on the vanishing point of this convergence, Horkheimer notes that Plato in the *Republic* similarly “projects an equilibrium between individual liberty and group control in the interests of the community,” insofar as “the value of each being is assessed in the light of a pre-existing teleology” based on the individual’s role in society.⁴³ However, he too recognizes in a partial way that the self-conscious choice of subjects plays a role in constituting social life, for “man makes himself at least to this extent, that he fulfils his innate potentialities.”⁴⁴ While Plato limits the potentialities of classes of subjects, Horkheimer emphasizes that he recognizes a relation between the subject’s own constituting activity and how well it may realize its entelechy.

Finally, Horkheimer notes that in the dialogues and most supremely the *Trial*, Socrates’ “affirmation of conscience raised the relation between the individual and the universal to a new level.”⁴⁵ Instead of conceiving of the individual as moral to the extent it conforms to its entelechy, thus as enveloped by a static political order, Socrates presumes the inverse: the conscience of the individual is able to evaluate the order which enables and constrains it. The relation between the constituting subject and the ends it pursues is no longer understood merely to be one of actualization, but is further one of judgment, “For Socrates,

⁴² Ibid., 130.

⁴³ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 134.

following in the line of the speculations of the great Sophists, to desire or even to do the right thing without reflection was not enough. Conscious choice was a prerequisite of the ethical way of life.”⁴⁶ Socrates is thus exemplary, for Horkheimer, because he is the first to locate the justification of the universal in the experience of the sensuous individual. In a contemporaneous essay Horkheimer defines precisely this as the goal of the philosopher, to raise the question of the relation “between his particular existence and the general life of society,” in order that the life of the society might be reformed to fit the self-conscious goals of reflective subjects.⁴⁷

According to Horkheimer, this relation between social life and subjectivity is suppressed for a time after Socrates during a period of intense social upheaval in favor of self-mastery.⁴⁸ Yet if Epicureans and Stoics, for instance, presume the withdrawal of the subject from the life of the *polis*, early Christianity, “in sharp contrast with ... Hellenistic ethical philosophies,” replaces withdrawal by associating the “mastering of natural drives” on which this earlier philosophy is based with an interest in social *caritas*.⁴⁹ Christianity did not abstractly negate self-mastery as such; rather, the temporal preservation of the self motivating such internal restraint is transfigured in Christianity as a concern with “the eternal life of the soul.”⁵⁰ A Christian continues to defer the immediate desires of her ego, yet this sacrifice is situated, on the one side, by the goal of temporal *caritas* and, on the other, an eternal, if deferred, self-realization.⁵¹ The same narrative that introduces an eternal horizon to situate and transfigure the antique account of self-mastery in so doing also

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture” (1941), in *Critical Theory*, 265.

⁴⁸ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 135.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 136.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

recovers and elevates the idea of the individual's conscience as a seat of judgment (thus the following passage mirrors Horkheimer's approbation of Socrates in an instructive manner). At the same time, however, it now presents the individual not merely as the judge of claims regarding the intelligible, but further as an end-in-itself,

The value of the soul was enhanced by the idea of equality implied in God's creation of man in his own image and in Christ's atonement for all mankind. The very concept of the soul as the inner light, the dwelling place of God, came into being only with Christianity, and all antiquity has an element of emptiness and aloofness by contrast.⁵²

Inverting the relation between the sensuous individual and the totality, so that the conscience of the former not only stands in judgment on the latter but is the end which the latter exists to serve, notes Horkheimer, is a qualitative advance over antique forms of metaphysics, for it presents a way of understanding subjects and their ends as intrinsically worthwhile apart from their "fit" with the immediacies of temporal preservation.

Subsequent renaissance humanists deny the eternal horizon with its (supposed) deferral of the empirical ego, replacing it with an emphasis on the *hic et nunc*; at the same time, however, they preserve the privileging of the subject whose conscious self-determination in this life is portrayed as the purpose which the social order serves.

Hamlet, often called the first truly modern individual, is the embodiment of the idea of individuality for the very reason that he fears the finality of death, the terror of the abyss. The profundity of his metaphysical reflections, the subtle shadings of his mind, presuppose the conditioning of Christianity. Although Hamlet, a good disciple of Montaigne, lost his Christian faith, he retained his Christian soul, and in a way this marks the origin of the modern individual. Renaissance humanism preserves the infinite value of the individual as conceived by Christianity but absolutizes it, thus fully crystallizing it but also preparing its destruction.⁵³

Horkheimer's description of Renaissance humanism as a form of sublation that negates the idea of an eternal horizon but preserves central implications of the Christian "soul" in a

⁵² Ibid., 135.

⁵³ Ibid., 137.

distinct form, as the temporal self-determination of the individual, stands in continuity with his previous reflections on the growing historical consciousness of the subject. Yet he notes that by “absolutizing” the conscious decisions of the individual apart from any account of its social and material antecedents, the humanist has a thoroughgoing blindness to the way social practices determine the subject, a blindness which comes to characterize bourgeois individualism.⁵⁴

In his outline of the history of philosophy, Horkheimer thus presents the self-realization of the subject in its social practices as the final stage of the subject’s arising self-consciousness and the goal of modern life. This, he argues, is the outcome of a progression which is implicitly expressed in past historical moments, yet with various degrees of inconsistency that drive subjects to reformulate their self-understanding. In this way, his account mirrors the approach of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, with the significant exception that he does not believe progression towards the *telos* of the Enlightenment is inexorable. Indeed, its postulated apex, the self-realization of the subject, has yet to be accomplished.

Such self-realization, Horkheimer wishes to argue, is threatened by the inability of the subject to articulate the continuing significance of historical concepts of the intelligible in a form suited to the modern self-understanding. Positivism, as we have noted, abstractly negates every such concept, including the modern goal of the self-determination of the subject. Yet however attractive the attempt to reassert meaning in response to this radical disenchantment may appear, Horkheimer insists, by the very form of his argument, that one

⁵⁴ For a detailed development of this account of Renaissance humanism, note Horkheimer’s essay, “Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism” (1938), in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 265-312. Horkheimer concludes the passage just cited by repeating a description of bourgeois individualism consonant with his earliest essays, cf. “Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History” (1930), in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 334.

may not abstract an understanding of intelligible concepts from the history of their use. To demonstrate how this both leads to a distorted interpretation of historical concepts as well as an inability to preserve their significance for modern life, Horkheimer turns to examine the particular case of neo-Thomism.

2.2.2. Reading Thomas against the neo-Thomists

Horkheimer notes that Thomas offered a synthesis between theological reflection and the science of his time by translating orthodox doctrine using Aristotelian categories,

Thomas helped the Catholic Church to absorb the new scientific movement by reinterpreting the content of Christian religion by the liberal methods of analogy, induction, conceptual analysis, deduction from allegedly evident axioms, and through the use of Aristotelian categories, which at his time still corresponded to the level reached by empirical science.⁵⁵

For instance, Thomas expressed the “content” of theology without assuming any necessary dichotomy between the logical categories by which natural philosophers comprehended the cause of particular objects and the categories by which the theologian described the cause of human action. This enabled the former as a discipline to remain “independent of and yet compatible with the intellectual progress of urban society,”⁵⁶ by which Horkheimer means that the medieval subject could recognize in Thomas an expression of the significance of Christian thought and devotion that, while not reducible to the observations of the Aristotelian sciences, was nevertheless conceivable in relation to the logical categories employed by the latter. Consequently, Horkheimer notes, “the truths of religion were as

⁵⁵ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 67.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

concrete as any scientific truth”⁵⁷ and “unbelief was considered not only a characteristic of sinners but also of fools, whose reason did not function properly.”⁵⁸

In particular, moral philosophy was “rational” for the inhabitants of the medieval form of life because they believed that the laws guiding human behavior as well as the natural behavior of other creatures were not categorically distinct. Both expressed premises derived from observation regarding the sorts of action which would enable respective kinds of beings to reach their appointed end in accord with the divine will. The natural sciences and moral philosophy were thus related in an analogous way to the experience of the subject, “divine and natural knowledge, divine and natural laws, were one.”⁵⁹

Later theologians, facing the challenge presented by the emergence of the new sciences, had to reckon with the fact that teleological ends were increasingly distinguished from the categories employed by scientific observation.⁶⁰ At the very least, the teleology supposed by Christian theologians could no longer be justified by appealing to its congruence with the taken-for-granted empirical observation of formal and final causes. In response, theologians, notes Horkheimer, gradually began distinguishing between *principia*. Scientific observation could reach certain kind of truths (“natural revelation” described observable truth regarding the material and efficient causes of natural laws). Yet there were other truths which were based solely upon the self-authenticating Word of God, “a certain, unchanging, separated area of validity [*Bereich besonderer Geltung*], unassailable by the new

⁵⁷ Ibid., 67-68.

⁵⁸ Horkheimer, “Observations on the Liberalization of Religion” (1971), trans. Eduardo Mendieta, in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 251; trans. modified: “Bemerkungen zur Liberalisierung der Religion” in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 233. For a similar formulation, note “Über den Zweifel” (1969), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 219.

⁵⁹ Horkheimer, “Theism and Atheism” (1963), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 38.

⁶⁰ Spinoza articulates an attitude common to the early *Aufklärers*, “Nature has no ends set before it, and all final causes are nothing but human fictions,” quoted in Johnathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 233.

natural sciences.”⁶¹ Among these were included “special” revelation regarding formal and final causes.

Thomas acknowledged, of course, that there were revealed truths that were inaccessible to observation and experience. He affirmed articles of faith which Aristotle’s scientific practices of observations did not assume and which could not be described on the basis of experience (such as, most famously, the creation of the world *ex nihilo*). However, he carefully maintained that such truths were not incompatible with the basic categories provided by Aristotelian logic. Yet while the distinction between kinds of revelation was thus not invented by subsequent theologians, they broadened it in ways unthinkable to Thomas,

Up through the time of Thomas Aquinas, the supernatural light was considered as the source of only a few dogmas, such as the Trinity and the Immaculate Conception. Already however by the end of the 13th century by the time of Duns Scotus, the number of unverifiable theological propositions had increased many times over. Finally, Protestantism declared the entirety of biblical teaching as its own spiritual region beyond natural knowledge.⁶²

Subtly, a distinct account of two forms of authority, one based in observation and the interpretation of sense-experience, the other based in an immediate self-authenticating authority began to emerge,

Religion attempted to evade this threat [the threat presented by the cosmology of the new sciences] ... by distinguishing itself from the area of knowledge that since the Scholastics had been bound together with religion, and establishing itself alongside scientifically secure results and useful hypotheses that had yet to be scientifically confirmed as a third and independent vast area of knowledge. In particular, Luther and the Reformers heavily stressed the independence of faith when compared to every form of knowledge.⁶³

⁶¹ Horkheimer, “Über den Zweifel,” 214.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Horkheimer, “Observations on Liberalization,” 252; trans. modified: “Bemerkungen zur Liberalisierung,” 234-235. For a similar formulation, note: “Pessimismus Heute” (1971) in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 225.

The difference between the two kinds of authority, notes Horkheimer, is most evident in discussions of moral philosophy.

Among the Reformers, Horkheimer notes, Luther subjected to scathing criticism the idea that one could be as certain about the rational deduction of laws guiding human behavior as one might be in deducing the laws of nature based on observation. One is not capable, he maintained, of measuring the fittedness of the act to the human entelechy, for moral ends are unknowable to sinful humans on the basis of mere observation.

The view that men could justify their private or collective lives in theological terms and determine whether they were in harmony with the divine seemed to [Luther] sheer pride and superstition. ... In the end nobody knew what good works were—the church as little as a secular board of censors. Luther’s verdict against theological speculation, which anticipated Kant’s limitation of metaphysical speculation, left reason free to roam this vale of tears—in empirical research, in commerce, and especially in secular government. The interest of the individual and the state became the criterion of action in this world. Whether the troops waded in the blood of peasants who had arisen from hunger, or whether a man sacrificed himself out of political blindness to share his last bread with them, one action was as ‘Christian’ as the other, provided each agent sincerely believed that he was following the Word.⁶⁴

While the scientific method yields claims that can be judged “true” or “false” on the basis of observation, claims regarding teleological ends are based on something other than such experience, thus presenting a second category of knowledge, “ideas that cannot be grounded by experience and reason” but may yet be “considered valid as faith.”⁶⁵ Such “ideas,” once described by Thomas in a way congruent with the practice of the Aristotelian sciences, were now understood to be altogether veiled from observation.

⁶⁴ Horkheimer, “Theism and Atheism,” 39. There is more diversity among the Reformers than Horkheimer realizes. For instance, Calvin’s account of the moral law has significant similarities with Aquinas, cf. Allen Verhey’s, “Natural Law in Aquinas and Calvin,” in *God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stouth*, ed. Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 83-91. My purpose, however, is to give an account of Horkheimer’s understanding of intelligible concepts, not evaluate his analysis of the Reformation.

⁶⁵ Horkheimer, “Religion and Philosophy,” in *Frankfurt School on Religion*, 245; trans. modified: “*Religion und Philosophie*,” in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 190.

The emergence of the new sciences and the corresponding end of Aristotelian cosmology thus established conditions under which the past intelligible claims of theology regarding the origin and good of human life became gradually disconnected from observational practices in the sciences. Conversely, scientific practices were disconnected from claims regarding the human good.

Thus came into being what for many parts of European humanity became decisive, the validity of two spheres in human life, belief, and knowledge, regions which were independent of one another and which even contradicted each other. Religion became one compartment of spirit [*des Geistes*], science another.⁶⁶

During the Enlightenment, this devolves into an abstract critique of metaphysics as such, “What transcends the facts, in the sense of eternal meaning, turns into untenable illusion, into a field of free speculation, an outmoded explanation of the world [*Welterklärung*] corresponding to the early steps of human development.”⁶⁷

Given this survey of the historical landscape, Horkheimer’s conclusion is that to continue to appeal to Thomas’ original categories presumes an Aristotelian form of science no longer reflective of modern practices of inquiry, “The neo-Thomists’ use of categories such as cause, purpose, force, soul, entity is necessarily uncritical. While for Thomas these metaphysical ideas represented scientific knowledge at its peak, their function in modern culture has completely changed.”⁶⁸ The hypostatization of the categories of a past historical moment necessarily leads, thinks Horkheimer, to the separation of theological claims from taken for granted modern practices of observation, for “the findings of modern science

⁶⁶ Horkheimer, “*Pessimismus Heute*,” 225. For similar formulations, note: *Eclipse*, 16-18 and “Observations on Liberalization,” 252.

⁶⁷ Horkheimer, “Religion and Philosophy,” 244; trans. modified: “*Religion und Philosophie*,” 188.

⁶⁸ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 63-64.

contradict the scholastic *ordo* and Aristotelian metaphysics too patently.”⁶⁹ Thus the categories of neo-Thomism must be “artificially kept from entering into conflict or even interaction with modern science.”⁷⁰ The preservation of such categories not only no longer serves Thomas’ original unitive intent, it requires its adherents to actively distinguish between the categories of theology and the practices of observation employed in the modern sciences. The judgments regarding formal and final causes allowed by past historical categories are thus insulated as self-evident “first principles,” whose content may be taken as authoritative for subjects apart from taken for granted practices of scientific observation.

In a very compact Hegelian judgment summarizing the forgetting of the historicity of concepts, Horkheimer concludes,

The more these artificial renaissances strive to keep intact the letter of the original doctrines, the more they distort the original meaning, for truth is forged in an evolution of changing and conflicting ideas. Thought is faithful to itself largely through being ready to contradict itself, while preserving, as inherent elements of truth, the memory of the processes by which it was reached.⁷¹

Abstractly lifting concepts from a historical form of life and reasserting them in a contemporary context requires no memory of the concrete problems which the past use of concepts intended to address. Thus while originally Thomism intended to unite the practice of theology with the Aristotelian sciences, contemporary reassertions of its categories in fact disaggregate the practice of theology from modern scientific categories. Such retrievals “distort the original meaning” instead of engaging in an attempt to judge analogies between

⁶⁹ Ibid., 64. This historical claim rests on a contrast between the way Darwinian evolution and Aristotelian natural philosophy explain the process and purpose of species development. An attempt to evaluate the significance of his argument in relation to neo-Thomism would need to attend to whether such a sharp contrast is justifiable. My interest, however, is in offering an account of the shape of Horkheimer’s appeal to intelligible concepts, not evaluating the cogency of his critique.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 68.

⁷¹ Ibid., 62-63.

the original setting, which determined the use of concepts, and the present historical moment. Consequently, they are unable to establish what may be “preserved” in the use of such concepts for the sake of subjects who have experienced the eclipse of past categories as a loss.

Horkheimer’s argument is thus not that modern self-consciousness requires the negation of metaphysical categories as such. Rather he outlines a feature that should be included in the re-articulation of such concepts; namely, they should be justified for a subject not as intuitive or self-evident immediacies (as in the case of such “artificial renaissances”), but on the basis of the subject’s judgment regarding its own experiences, in terms congruent with its self-understanding as a modern.

3. Critical theory and the fulfillment of the Enlightenment project

In presenting positivism and metaphysical revivals as two mistaken ways of treating intelligible concepts, Horkheimer’s late work focuses on two hermeneutical questions: whether the significance of intelligible concepts can in fact be preserved for modern subjects and how such preservation might proceed in a way sensitive to their self-understanding. I have so far left undeveloped his frequent claim that subjects are presently unable to inhabit the modern project with satisfaction precisely due to a failure to preserve intelligible concepts. In this final section, I will begin by noting the argument Horkheimer offers for this claim, before developing his account of a proper way of preserving such concepts. This understanding will lay the groundwork for appreciating his late attempt to retrieve the significance of theological concepts.

We have noted that part of the historical self-consciousness of the modern subject includes distinguishing social practices from the law-like inexorability of natural

occurrences. Moderns thus judge the adequacy of a social practice on the basis of their own sensuous experience, not in terms of a meaning whose truth is self-evident. The ability to judge in such a way, notes Horkheimer, supposes a developing distinction between the identity of the subject and the social practice it inhabits that is not typical of previous historical moments,

Once [the subject] was through and through a master or a servant, a knight or a bondsman: his human substance was defined by the facets of social inequality. Today his place in the social hierarchy does not appear any longer as part of his own nature; he knows how to differentiate between himself and his role in society.⁷²

This yields a two-fold result. On the one hand, differentiation allows moderns to judge taken for granted traditional practices according to their own sensuous experience, thus giving them a voice in determining the shape of the practices and community life they inhabit, “The modern ego in so far as it distinguishes itself clearly from any debasing social categories, corresponds more adequately to the idea of humanity than did the self-consciousness of man in any period of the past.”⁷³ On the other, however, differentiating identity from social practices necessarily entails that one’s identity will be characterized by “abstractness and inaccessibility.”⁷⁴ The subject experiences once taken for granted practices not as constitutive of its essence but rather as self-chosen, but the self that chooses is also abstracted from every social tie that might provide it direction in choosing. The abstract subject of modern philosophy thus mirrors the actual social situation of the modern subject.⁷⁵

⁷² Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family Today,” in *The Family: Its Function and Destiny*, ed. R.N. Anshem (New York: Harper, 1949), 386-387.

⁷³ Ibid., 387.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Horkheimer notes, “This ‘self,’ psychologically involved as the personality may be, is the abstract subject of self-interest as proclaimed in nineteenth-century economic and philosophical thought” (ibid.).

In order to address onerous social relations, subjects needed to be able to distinguish their identity from repressive institutions and roles they inhabited. The “enlightened” abstract subject with its attendant alienation was thus a necessary step in reforming the social life of subjects in accord with their experience. It was not, however, the only step necessary. Horkheimer thus notes, “Only after the ego has learned to conceive of itself as the abstract subject of reason,” that is, only after it has learned to distinguish its own identity from the social roles it inhabits, “can it identify itself intelligently with the positive forces in humanity and thus regain a new and higher concreteness.”⁷⁶ If this *re-*identification does not occur, the modern subject remains atomized and does not conclude a reflective return to self-satisfaction through an identification of the practices defining its life as its own. The simple negation of past forms of life without a corresponding re-identification and return leads to an overwhelming experience of anomie: claims regarding intelligible ends are increasingly judged to be meaningless or relegated to choices regarding “private” leisure that have no direct impact on the public reasoning that directs economic activity or scientific inquiry.⁷⁷ The rupture between the individual and the opaque public ends it pursues consequently widens, stymieing the political project of the Enlightenment.

From the preceding, we may note that the content of intelligible concepts, for Horkheimer, is not merely an “empty” projection of reason or the imagination (positivism), nor an intuition whose authority for the subject is self-evident (metaphysical revivals). Rather, such concepts refer to social practices of description and evaluation that are learned

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Horkheimer often discusses the distinction between “public” economic production and “private” leisure, while construing the latter as the final domesticated domain of the teleological: Horkheimer, “Montaigne,” 289; “Art and Mass Culture,” 290; *Eclipse*, 37-41, 142-143; “*Über den Zweifel*,” 215-216, 218-219.

within a community, practices which guide members of a community in pursuing ends held in common. As Horkheimer puts it in *Eclipse*,

These old forms of life smoldering under the surface of modern civilizations still provide, in many cases, the warmth inherent in any delight, in any love of a thing for its own sake rather than for that of another thing. ... The sense of beauty in both nature and art is connected, by a thousand delicate threads, to these old superstitions. If by either flouting or flaunting the threads, modern man cuts them, the pleasure may continue for a while but its inner life is extinguished.⁷⁸

Thus Horkheimer wishes to challenge the claim that pre-modern accounts of teleology are merely vestigial traces of a humanity in its infancy that may be dispensed summarily without remainder or cost.

Horkheimer continues by noting that such traditions shape the subject's experience of its world qualitatively. To demonstrate the point, he proceeds micrologically, noting that activities as seemingly mundane as courtesy, culinary taste, sanitation, art, gardening, and even hiking once reflected judgments about the goodness of particular experiences for their own sake learned by subjects in a particular form of life.⁷⁹ Far from being hermetically sealed off from historical contingency, the enjoyment of such activities as worthwhile "in themselves" loses coherence when the intelligible wholes which once provided both the concepts and grammar that sustained them fall into disuse. The negation of the intelligible wholes presented in pre-modern narratives thus qualitatively alters the shape of experience for agents,

We cannot credit our enjoyment of a flower or the atmosphere of a room to an autonomous aesthetic instinct. Man's aesthetic responsiveness relates in its prehistory to various forms of idolatry; his belief in the goodness or sacredness of a thing precedes his enjoyment of its beauty. This applies no less to such concepts as freedom and

⁷⁸ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 35-36.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 35, 37-38.

humanity. What has been said about the dignity of man is certainly applicable to the concepts of justice and equality.⁸⁰

To say that a subject's "belief in the goodness or sacredness of a thing precedes his enjoyment of its beauty" or that this "sense of beauty" far from being an "autonomous aesthetic instinct" is shaped by prior judgments regarding ends, is to note not only that the basic unit of currency for positivism, sensation, does not get to the bottom of what experience actually is for historical subjects (as if the experience of sensation could be abstracted from the particular cultural and historical practices of understanding learned by the subject in community), it is also to note that the abstract negation of such traditions deprives the subject of a way of expressing the meaningfulness of certain experiences. Modern subjects who have gained critical distance from traditions thus risk the loss of certain qualitative forms of experience which were once deeply meaningful for them. This loss is felt even more acutely when they are unable to identify themselves anew with *any* such whole.

It might thus appear that Horkheimer wishes to seal off past traditions from any kind of critique, as if the only alternative to the risk of the loss of such grammars of experience is to treat them as a-historical and invariable. However, note his conclusion to the passage just cited:

Such ideas [historical convictions regarding the goodness or sacredness of a thing] must preserve the negative element, as the negation of the ancient stage of injustice or inequality, and at the same time conserve the original absolute significance rooted in their dreadful origins. Otherwise they become not only indifferent but untrue.⁸¹

Horkheimer does not call for a simple reassertion of past intelligible concepts. Rather, he notes, theorists must recognize how contemporary judgments regarding the good

⁸⁰ Ibid., 36. I have amended the text for purposes of clarity.

⁸¹ Ibid.

(expressed for moderns in constellations of concepts like “freedom,” “dignity,” “justice” and “equality”) have become intuitive for subjects as the outcome of a historical process, in relation to “the negation of [an] ancient stage of injustice or inequality.” While the continuing significance such concepts have for subjects is inextricably bound to accounts of intelligible realities (bound together, that is, with mythic notions of “dreadful origins”), their use thus remains compelling for subjects only insofar as it is situated as an advance over against past historical experiences.

There is thus a second reason besides the loss of qualitative forms of experience why subjects may become alienated at the loss of past intelligible concepts. Such concepts may have embodied for them an advance over what Horkheimer terms a “past stage of injustice,” the loss of which appears to threaten regression. Only as this developing relationship between the memory of subjects and historical practices is appreciated can changes in the use of concepts over time, as well as the alienation felt by individuals at such changes, be fully appreciated.

Horkheimer offers the following example of the historical development of concepts in order to illustrate his argument. He notes that the egalitarian ideas invoked by the *Aufklärer* had their original genesis in a different historical context as part of an ideology that presented economic and social hierarchies as natural. The idea of dignity, for instance, originally arose as an attribute which distinguished the natural superiority of men of nobility from the masses. Yet it was taken up by those struggling against this supposedly natural hierarchy and appropriated in a distinct yet related form more adequate to their own purposes.

At all times, the good has shown the traces of the oppression in which it originated. Thus the idea of the dignity of man is born from the experience of barbarian forms of

domination. During the most ruthless phases of feudalism, dignity was an attribute of might. Emperors and kings wore halos. They demanded and received veneration. Anyone who was negligent in obeisance was punished, anyone who committed *lèse majesté* was put to death. Today, freed from its bloody origin, the notion of the dignity of the individual is one of the ideas defining a humane organization of society.

The concepts of law, order, justice, and individuality have had a similar evolution. ... The value of the individual has been extolled by those who had an opportunity of developing their individualities at the expense of others.

Again and again in history, ideas have cast off their swaddling clothes and struck out against the social systems that bore them. The cause, in large degree, is that spirit, language, and all the realms of the mind necessarily stake universal claims. Even ruling groups, intent above all upon defending their particular interests, must stress universal motifs in religion, morality, and science.⁸²

When a concept like “human dignity” is taken up and rearticulated by subjects struggling against an oppressive social order, it testifies to a universal which is neither an immediately observable sense-experience (as the positivists note), nor extricable from an account of intelligible wholes (as metaphysicians note). Yet this does not mean that the concept is unconditioned by historical experience. For it testifies to the relation between historical subjects and the social order they inhabit, and expresses the subjects’ judgment regarding the form which the social order should take. In the hands of the noble or, by contrast, the leader of a bourgeois political movement, the uses of a concept like “dignity” are quite different, yet Horkheimer’s argument is that such uses may be related historically: the latter involves an inference regarding the former which arises in response to the historical dissatisfaction of subjects, an application of the established attribute of a given group of subjects to a more diverse set *via* a hitherto unexamined analogy, which itself comes to light in the midst of the latter subjects’ particular struggle for recognition. The “dignity of the

⁸² Ibid., 177-178. Horkheimer telescopes this historical account in “Feudal Lord, Customer, and Specialist” (1964), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 124.

individual” once reserved for the elite thus becomes catalytic as it is imaginatively extended to ever broadening classes and finally to humans as such.⁸³

Subjects thus appeal to past patterns of concept-use in order to draw analogies that will license inferences about their present moment, thereby reshaping the meaning of such concepts in the process of evaluating and altering existing conditions. This is why the appropriation of concepts by various historical subjects across time has, paradoxically, both a *sui generis* quality in every new historical moment, as well as very real historical continuity with the uses of past generations. Even though continuity between historical use and present application is maintained, due, as Horkheimer notes ambiguously, to the fact that language stakes “universal” claims, it is a continuity based in an analogy that is delimited by the particular historical circumstances and interests of the diverse subjects which put the concept to use, not merely by the repetition of an a-historical past meaning. Assuming mere repetition is the mistake of metaphysical revivals. “In trying to rescue the permanence of concepts,” notes Horkheimer, such appeals “turn every essential trait and intellectual manifestation into a genus with such wide meshes that it retains its validity against all phenomena.”⁸⁴ The historical use of the universal concept is thus altered by subsequent historical conditions as well as the changing projects of the subjects who use the concept.

If the contemporary meaning of intelligible concepts is dependent upon a history of use, the historical form of such concepts may be understood as the judgment of subjects in a past form of life regarding their social experience, a judgment which is developed by

⁸³ Jay M. Bernstein’s discussion in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 341 of how slavery comes to be taken as a violation of the norms of equity, in the context of his explanation of Adorno’s rejection of “a priori ethical truths,” informs the way I frame Horkheimer’s argument.

⁸⁴ Horkheimer, “Concept of Man,” 14.

subsequent members of a tradition in their use of such categories in the face of new experiences. While the positivist will abstract from the semantic identity of the concept employed in what we have termed “a history of use” by, for instance, labeling distinguishable uses of the concept in different periods with discrete neologisms, such logically neat abstractions do not express the content of the concept without remainder. In particular, inattention to historical development makes impossible recognition of the way layers of meaning presumed by the past use of a concept have been lost, preserved, or transformed in various historical moments. Thus Horkheimer notes,

Definitions acquire their full meanings in the course of a historical process. They cannot be used intelligently unless we humbly concede that their penumbræ are not easily penetrated by linguistic short-cuts. If, through fear of possible misunderstandings, we agree to eliminate the historical elements and to offer supposedly atemporal sentences as definitions, we deny ourselves the intellectual heritage bequeathed to philosophy from the beginning of thought and experience. The impossibility of such a complete disavowal is evidenced in the procedure of the most antihistorical ‘physicalist’ philosophy of our times, logical empiricism. Even its protagonists admit some undefinable terms of everyday usage into their dictionary of strictly formalized science, thus paying tribute to the historical nature of language.⁸⁵

Abstracting from a historical pattern of use renders impossible a judgment regarding the value of either the loss or preservation of particular historical meanings for the contemporary subject. If the purpose of the theorist is to address the alienation arising for subjects due to the loss of historical meaning, positivism obscures from view this very experience of “loss.”

Both metaphysical revivals and positivist definitions of the concept abstract from such historical patterns of use; both thereby make the analysis of loss and the project of preservation impossible. By contrast, notes Horkheimer, an appreciation of the historical

⁸⁵ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 165. Cf. 171, “Philosophical concepts become inadequate, empty, false, when they are abstracted from the process through which they have been obtained.”

use of the concept in past forms of life illustrates how the concept may be “re-experienced and preserved” in a more adequate form in a changed historical moment, thus redressing the alienation contemporary subjects experience when past uses are lost. In a passage which is critical for understanding his late work, Horkheimer notes,

Philosophy must become more sensitive to the muted testimonies of language and plumb the layers of experience preserved in it. Each language carries a meaning embodying the thought forms and belief patterns rooted in the evolution of the people who speak it. ... [The philosopher] cannot talk about man, animal, society, world, mind, thought, as the natural scientist talks about a chemical substance: the philosopher does not have the formula.

There is no formula. Adequate description, unfolding the meaning of any of these concepts, with all its shades and its interconnections with other concepts, is still a main task. Here the word with its half-forgotten layers of meaning and association is a guiding principle. These implications have to be re-experienced and preserved, as it were, in more enlightened and universal ideas.⁸⁶

This attempt to preserve the meaning of historical concepts, I will suggest, is Horkheimer’s central preoccupation in his late essays on theology.

In an essay contemporaneous to *Eclipse*, Horkheimer begins to explain what he means by arguing that concepts should be “preserved” in a “more enlightened” form adequate to the concerns of new generations of subjects,

Categories become distorted or meaningless unless they enter new, more adequate structures that are required by the particular historical situations in which they play a part. The reason for this is not that each period has its own truth assigned to it, as historical and sociological relativism would like us to believe, or that one can dispense with philosophic and religious traditions, but rather that intellectual loyalty, without which truth cannot exist, consists both in preserving past insights and contradicting and transforming them.⁸⁷

The reason concepts must be preserved in new forms is not, he notes, because the truth of ideas are relative to the cultures of their genesis. Although, of course, there is no unmediated knowledge of reality apart from concrete “philosophic and religious traditions”

⁸⁶ Ibid., 165-166.

⁸⁷ Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture,” 286.

(traditions, note, which Horkheimer already acknowledges are *indispensible*), truth, notes Horkheimer, should not simply be conflated with the explanations of such traditions. As we have noted, Horkheimer believes truth is a historically contingent relation of satisfaction between a subject inhabiting a tradition and its world. One may thus note the truth of a concept in terms of a particular history of habits of use, by making comparative judgments regarding the satisfaction which the use of various concepts have afforded historically situated subjects in the projects they pursue, without either appealing outside contingent histories of use to a standpoint free of tradition or treating the truth of a concept as if it were exclusively determined by the tradition instead of by a relation between subjects inhabiting tradition and the world.

If the reason why concepts must be preserved in a form sensitive to the concerns of new generations is not due to an inflated doctrine of relativism, neither are concepts preserved for the sake of a “universal” or “absolute” a-historical truth. Such formal abstractions, Horkheimer continues, have no concrete meaning for subjects in a form of life, except perhaps underwriting their already chosen projects, for “abstract formulations of the highest values are always adjustable to the practice of stake and guillotine.”⁸⁸ Rather the motivation for preserving concepts in a form adequate to modern life is simply the alienation subjects experience at the destruction of a given historical pattern of use, “Knowledge really concerned with values does not look to higher realms,” notes Horkheimer. “It rather tries to penetrate the cultural pretences of its time, in order to distinguish the features of a frustrated humanity. Values are to be disclosed by uncovering

⁸⁸ Ibid.

the historical practice that destroys them.”⁸⁹ Subjects experience alienation at the lapse of historical pattern of use, and the theorist must be concerned with a practice of retrieval which aims to preserve what is at risk of being lost due to this cessation. Any such retrieval will not be meaningful for such affected subjects, however, unless the concepts retrieved “enter new, more adequate structures that are required by the particular historical situations in which they play a part.”

Failure to engage this task, Horkheimer has already implied, risks the loss of the historically situated ideals upon which the Enlightenment political project itself is based. Thus he concludes *Eclipse* programmatically by implying that this task of preservation must be constitutive of his future theoretical efforts,

By doing justice to those images and ideas that at given times dominated reality in the role of absolutes ... and that have been relegated in the course of history, philosophy can function as a corrective of history, so to speak. Thus ideological stages of the past would not be equated simply with stupidity and fraud—the verdict brought against medieval thought by the philosophy of the French Enlightenment. Sociological and psychological explanation of earlier beliefs would be distinct from philosophical condemnation and suppression of them. Though divested of the power they had in their contemporary setting, they would serve to cast light upon the current course of humanity. In this function, philosophy would be mankind’s memory and conscience.⁹⁰

The task of preservation is described in this passage as an intentional effort to repair the alienation arising from the loss of past habits of thought “that have been relegated in the course of history” due to the modern tendency to separate reasoning about concepts from historical traditions of use. This presumes both that intelligible concepts should not be abstractly negated, “equated simply with stupidity and fraud” and subjected to “philosophical condemnation and suppression” (the abstract negation of the positivists), nor anachronistically reasserted, as if they still contained “the power they had in their

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 186.

contemporary setting” (the mistake of metaphysical revivals), but rather presented to moderns in a distinctive form adequate to their own self-consciousness, thus reconstituted in such a way that they may “serve to cast light upon the current course of humanity.” It is by engaging this task of preservation that the theorist “can function as a corrective of history” and be the “memory and conscience” of a people by redressing the loss of past categories of use.

Horkheimer frequently references this task of the critical theorist in his later work as the preservation of past traditions and the experiences that they once enabled in a form appropriate to contemporary life. The following instances are illustrative,

Critical theory has always had a double assignment: to describe that which needs to change and to preserve certain cultural moments. Beyond this it has to describe the process of change, to which our world is subject. ...

... We spoke already about the fact that theology, albeit in another form, may be worth preserving and also that liberalism issued forth a positive force which one should preserve, even in an administered world. Many such cultural moments could be named.⁹¹

One cannot reverse such a process [the total transformation of every area of being into a sphere of means]. One can only attempt to preserve something from the [past] traditions by also making the changes visible in their negativity.⁹²

The service which philosophy is still able to render to that which is passing [*dem Vergehenden*] consists in showing the process of this passing and its consequences.⁹³

We may conclude on the basis of such programmatic statements that the task of preservation for the critical theorist is envisioned by Horkheimer as a two-fold repair of the elision of “histories of use,” (the common mistake, we have noted, of both “positivism” and “metaphysical revivals”):

⁹¹ Horkheimer, “*Was wir ‘Sinn’ nennen, wird verschwinden*” (1970), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 345, 354. Cf. “*Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen*” (1970), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 396.

⁹² Horkheimer, “*Die Sehnsucht*,” 403. Cf. similar formulation regarding changes within the family in “*Was wir ‘Sinn’ nennen*,” 356.

⁹³ Horkheimer, “Religion and Philosophy” (1969), 250; trans. modified: “*Religion und Philosophie*,” 196.

(1): Preservation should articulate the alienation subjects experience at the loss of traditional patterns of reasoning (i.e. “making the changes visible in their negativity,” “showing the process of this passing and its consequences,” or put positively, “doing justice to those images and ideas that at given times dominated reality in the role of absolutes”);

(2): Preservation should guide subjects in retrieving the meaning of past categories in a form adequate to their own self-understanding and experience as moderns (i.e. “theology, albeit in another form, may be worth preserving” or put broadly “sociological and psychological explanation of earlier beliefs would be distinct from philosophical condemnation and suppression of them”).

With these features in mind, we may conclude by noting an instructive relation between Horkheimer’s earliest approach to the philosophy of history and this late concern with preservation.

Horkheimer consistently and self-consciously maintains throughout his work that traditions may not be rejected simply because they are forms of mediation (sense experience is necessarily mediated), and that traditions as forms of mediation may require alteration in the face of the dissatisfaction of subjects (early forms of a tradition may prove penultimate in relation to the shifting problems and projects of historical subjects). Horkheimer’s later reflections on the philosophy of history, while continuing to maintaining these emphases, changes its focus decisively. In his early work, he presumes that scientific practices complete earlier forms of knowing by allowing subjects to relate their present projects to reality in a comparably satisfactory way. Thus, for instance, he notes that religion is a “necessary and primitive form of knowledge, one that provides modern science with its

roots.”⁹⁴ In his later essays, however, he tests the idea that the relation between the two may also become reversed. The task of critical theory thus becomes not simply to illustrate the way modern science accomplishes the goals inadequately sought by past traditions of inquiry, but also an attempt to preserve what is valuable in such past traditions that is in danger of being lost in a form adequate to the concerns of modern life. In the final two chapters I will examine Horkheimer’s attempt to address the modern alienation resulting from this through the attempted retrieval and preservation of theological concepts.

⁹⁴ Horkheimer, “Bourgeois Philosophy of History,” 383.

Chapter 5

Theology and the task of preservation: The significance of theological concepts for modern life

In the last chapter, I noted two programmatic claims that structure Horkheimer's late work. First, prominent types of modern reflection (i.e. "positivism" and "metaphysical revivals") have in common that they divorce judgments regarding the significance of intelligible concepts from the unfolding history of their use and the sensuous experience of the subjects who use them. This makes the preservation of such concepts in a form suited to the self-understanding of moderns impossible. For moderns expect the use of concepts to be justified for them on the basis of their experience (not through an appeal to a "heteronomous" authority apart from such experience). Intelligible concepts thus increasingly fall out of use. Second, subjects are unable to participate in modern life in a way that satisfies their own expectations as a result this falling-out-of-use. For the satisfaction of modern subject requires, not the abstract negation of tradition, but a return to it characterized by the embrace of the historical practices of a tradition in a form congruent with the subject's own self-understanding. The question Horkheimer wishes to address in his late work is thus how may historical traditions and the accounts of the intelligible they present be preserved in a form that will satisfy the self-reflective modern subject?

Horkheimer offers three reflections on this question, noting,

- (1): Why theological concepts in particular must be retrieved if the satisfaction of modern subjects is to be realized,
- (2): How the content of theological concepts must be understood, if they are to fit the self-understanding of modern subjects, and

(3): How theological concepts may continue to be preserved in relation to the unfolding experience of modern subjects.

Before describing these reflections, I shall situate my interpretation in relation to a ubiquitous portrayal of Horkheimer's project that I wish to challenge, and preface the interpretation by an explanation of Horkheimer's understanding of the reasoning employed by the theologian. I will then examine his claims regarding the necessity of a retrieval of theological categories (section 1), describe his understanding of the content of theological concepts, as this finds expression in his critique of Tillich (section 2), and, finally, investigate how his late reflections Schopenhauer's philosophy relate to his account of the possible preservation and transformation of theological concepts (section 3). In the next chapter, I shall examine Horkheimer's attempt to explain how an existing practice, the Jewish liturgy, serves as a model for understanding the relationship between intelligible concepts and the continuing experience of subjects. Thus this chapter may be understood as laying out a framework for interpreting Horkheimer's late reflections on the Jewish liturgy, whereas the next investigates the significance of the liturgy for moderns as a model for preserving intelligible concepts.

On the occasions when it is paid attention, Horkheimer's late work is relegated to the status of a historical anomaly or treated as a foil for more attractive thinkers, both by the circle of critical theorists who have examined his later work in detail, as well as the broader philosophical community. I will attend to two approaches that exemplify this consensus.

In his survey, *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy*, Christopher Janaway notes that, in contrast to Lukács, Horkheimer did not appreciate how Schopenhauer's metaphysics

offered an “‘indirect apologetics’ for the political and economic status quo of the time.”¹

Janaway does not relate Horkheimer’s concern with Schopenhauer to his interest in theology, and equates his interest in Schopenhauer’s metaphysics with simple approbation.

This conclusion is drawn from a single installment of Horkheimer’s Schopenhauer Lectures, “Schopenhauer Today.” Yet between 1955 and 1971, Horkheimer considered Schopenhauer’s metaphysics in a series of five lectures given before the *Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft*.² Though only one is included in the standard English compilation of Horkheimer’s late essays, three of the five lectures focus on an interpretation of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the will.³

Perhaps due to the fact that Horkheimer is perceived as a relatively minor figure in 20th century philosophy, there has been little attempt by English-speaking scholars to examine his other lectures on Schopenhauer’s metaphysics. One must turn to the German interpretive literature to find such analysis. In this regard, it is fruitful to compare Alfred Schmidt’s review of Horkheimer’s “Schopenhauer and Society” to Janaway. In his comparable survey, *Idee und Weltwille: Schopenhauer als Kritiker Hegels*, Schmidt notes that the

¹ Christopher Janaway, *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 280-281.

² The “Schopenhauer Lectures” are “Schopenhauer and Society” (1955), trans. Todd Cronan, *Qui Parle* 15, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2004): 85-96; “Schopenhauer Today” (1961), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason: Lectures and Essays since the End of World War II*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et. al. (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 63-83; “Religion and Philosophy” (1967), trans. Eduardo Mendieta, in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 243-250; “Pessimismus heute” (1971), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen, 1949-1973*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, vol. 7 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Tauschenbush, 1985), 224-232, and “*Schopenhauers Denken in Verhältnis zu Wissenschaft und Religion*” (1971), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 240-252. I draw upon Alfred Schmidt’s list of lectures and dates: “Max Horkheimer’s Intellectual Physiognomy,” trans. John McCole, in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, eds. Seyla Benhabib et. al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 38-39, cf. 47, fn. 86.

³ “Pessimismus heute” and “Religion and Philosophy” primarily focus on the preservation of theological categories, thus I treat these in more detail in the next chapter. Of the remaining essays focusing on Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, “*Schopenhauers Denken in Verhältnis zu Wissenschaft und Religion*” has yet to be translated while “Schopenhauer and Society” was published in 2004 and is thus not included in the English compilation of Horkheimer’s later essays, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*.

essay “point[s] out insightfully the difficult way critical and reactionary moments in Schopenhauerian thought intertwine and are linked with one another.”⁴ In contrast to Janaway, Schmidt at least suggests that Horkheimer’s work involves selective appropriation, not mere approbation.

It would be too simplistic, however, to attribute this way of interpreting Horkheimer to factors extrinsic to the content of the texts in question. Jürgen Habermas’ seminal essay on the later Horkheimer, “To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning without God,” for instance, marshals untranslated interviews and essays to support the contention that Horkheimer embraced Schopenhauer’s metaphysics. This essay, examining “Horkheimer’s metaphysical need for religion,” evidences a level of complexity unparalleled in other interpreters and has exerted a significant pull on subsequent scholarship in critical theory.⁵ Habermas recognizes the intimate relationship between Horkheimer’s essays on Schopenhauer and his reflections on theology; further, he offers more than mere critique, sympathetically organizing Horkheimer’s late aphorisms and essays in relation to a central concern that Habermas maintains directs his late theorizing.

According to Habermas, Horkheimer’s reflections face an “aporia ... in consequence of two equally strong convictions.” On the one hand, he understood his task to be “salvaging the truth in religion in the spirit of the Enlightenment.” On the other, “it was clear to him that ‘one cannot secularize religion without giving it up.’”⁶ There are two notable features

⁴ Alfred Schmidt, *Idee und Weltwille: Schopenhauer als Kritiker Hegels* (München: C. Hanser, 1988), 101. For Schmidt’s description of Horkheimer’s critique of Schopenhauer’s “social pessimism” note 101-103.

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning without God is a Futile Undertaking: Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer,” in *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran P. Cronin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 145. For interpreters who follow Habermas’ approach to Horkheimer, note stage 4 in the Introduction.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 133, quoting “*Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen*” (1970), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 393. Habermas restates the aporia at 136-137.

of this formulation. First, “salvaging” and “secularizing” are equated. They need not be, of course: one might, for instance, imagine a selective embrace of past religious norms which does not involve the categorical separation of such norms from sacred narratives.

However, Habermas equates the two. Second, the “truth” or “essential substance of religion” which is to be salvaged is found, according to Habermas, in its unconditional “morality.”⁷ The attempt to salvage, as he describes it, thus involves the two-fold task of distinguishing an unconditional moral law from extraneous claims about divine self-revelation, and setting it on new footings. If one may not “secularize” or make a distinction between the moral “core” and the (figurative) “peripherals” of religion, then the task of salvaging will necessarily fail.

Habermas adds to this his own characteristic note: salvaging also fails if one believes there is no other basis for the moral “core” in the absence of revelation. If reason, left to its own devices, is portrayed simply as an instrument of the subject’s libido, and thus no longer “maintains a positive relation to the normative contents it uncovers step by step in the criticism of unjust conditions,” then, as no alternative exists, critique “must borrow its normative orientations from a cultural ethos that has already been superseded—that of a metaphysically grounded theology.”⁸

Habermas concludes that Horkheimer is in a precarious position: he is committed to the task of salvaging yet denies both its preconditions, that one may distinguish the moral core of religion from the peripheral, and that one may ground the moral core by the exercise of reason. According to Habermas, this dilemma arises for Horkheimer due to the (mistaken)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 135.

belief that theological metaphysics and the unconditionality of moral norms are intrinsically connected,

The thoughts of the late Horkheimer circle around the idea of a theology that *must* be ‘displaced’ by the critical and self-critical activity of reason, yet which, in its capacity as justifying morality’s claim to unconditionality, *cannot* be replaced by reason. Horkheimer’s late philosophy may be understood as wrestling with this dilemma and his interpretation of Schopenhauerian metaphysics as a proposal for resolving it.⁹

Schopenhauer’s account of the will offers Horkheimer an exit strategy in the form of a *tertium quid*. On the one hand, his metaphysics of the will offers “the prospect of a metaphysical justification of morality through insight into the constitution of the world as a whole” (i.e., an unconditional basis for morality),¹⁰ yet “at the same time” it is “directed against central assumptions of metaphysics and coheres with postmetaphysical skepticism concerning reason” (it thus allows a critique of both pre-critical theological metaphysics and the hidden libido served by reason).¹¹

Habermas is unsparing in his criticism of this supposed resolution. Even if one ignores the implausible idea that a subject may have a sense-intuition of the whole, the “shadow of performative self contradiction that has haunted all negative metaphysics since Schopenhauer and Nietzsche” looms large; it is impossible that a fundamentally selfish and egoistical will can turn reflexively “against itself.”¹²

⁹ Ibid., 136, his emphasis. Cf. Habermas’ explanation of the connection between the unconditioned and theological metaphysics at 140.

¹⁰ Ibid., 138. Cf. our discussion in section 3.2. of Habermas’ textual support of this claim from “*Schopenhauers Denken*,” 252.

¹¹ Ibid. Habermas terms this Schopenhauer’s “inverted Platonism.”

¹² In “From Utopia to Redemption: Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (1999): 132, Illan Gur-Ze’ev praises this turn towards negative metaphysical grounds without considering Habermas’ claim that it involves a performative contradiction. In a more nuanced manner, Gerard Raulet, “What Good is Schopenhauer? Remarks on Horkheimer’s Pessimism” *Telos*, no. 42 (1979-1980), 104, argues that it serves as a kind of regulative postulate for Horkheimer that allows the whole to be understood in a way which is functionally useful for the social critic. Both share with Habermas the idea that Horkheimer appeals to Schopenhauer’s metaphysics as a standpoint that enables critique.

Horkheimer is not ignorant of this performative contradiction, notes Habermas. His claims about the futility of meaning without God may thus also be understood, not simply as an expression of one side of the aporia, but as a “critique of Schopenhauer.”¹³ “In the final analysis,” notes Habermas, “Horkheimer’s ambiguous formulations vacillate between Schopenhauer’s negative metaphysical justification of morality and a return to the faith of his forefathers” in an “unresolved argumentative impasse.”¹⁴ On Habermas’ reading, there are thus two opposing poles between which Horkheimer is torn as he attempts to justify the unconditionality of ethical maxims, both of which posit an intelligible certainty existing beneath the contingencies of historical practices. The motivation underlying the too-and-fro is Horkheimer’s desire to find a defensible “unconditional” standpoint from which to measure truth claims. His late work on both theology and Schopenhauer may thus be characterized by an acceptance of the metaphysical idea of a god’s eye view,

Horkheimer assumes that there cannot be truth without an Absolute, without a world-transcending power “in which truth is sublated.” Without ontological anchoring, the concept of truth is exposed to the inner-worldly contingencies of mortal men and their changing situations; without it, truth is no longer an idea but merely a weapon in the struggle of life. Human knowledge, including moral insight, can lay claim to truth, he believes, only if it judges itself in terms of the relations between it and what is as these relations are manifested to the divine intelligence alone.¹⁵

For Horkheimer, concludes Habermas, “the meaning of truth” must thus include “the notion of unconditionality ... as one of its moments.”¹⁶

My interpretation differs from Habermas in two significant ways. First, I shall present a different understanding of the problem that motivates Horkheimer’s reflection on Schopenhauer and theology, and, consequently a different account of how he relates the

¹³ Habermas, “To Seek to Salvage,” 138.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 146.

two. In sections 1 and 2, I argue that intelligible concepts are not understood by Horkheimer as the products of an intuitive experience of the Absolute. Rather, such categories are social practices of description learned by subjects as they participate in religious communities. The impetus which motivates reflection for Horkheimer, in keeping with the argument we have already observed from *Eclipse of Reason*, is not the desire to secure an unconditional standpoint, but rather an interest in preserving historical practices of description in a form appropriate to modern life.

Second, this altered account of the problem around which Horkheimer's work constellates also produces a different way of relating the works. I shall illustrate that Horkheimer does not affirm Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will uncritically, such that his reflections may be set over against his return to theological sources. Rather, his interpretation of Schopenhauer is done in the service of his retrieval of theological concepts. As we shall see, Horkheimer repeatedly juxtaposes Schopenhauer's style of reasoning with his substantive conclusions, thereby distinguishing Schopenhauer's method of reasoning about the intelligible with his judgment regarding its content. While Horkheimer continually emphasizes a critique of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, he focuses on recovering aspects of Schopenhauer's style of reasoning as an example of a proper understanding of the relationship between sensuous particular experience and intelligible conceptions of the whole.

Having noted the interpretive questions at stake, I will now outline Horkheimer's understanding of the reasoning employed by the theologian, before examining his three-fold reflection on the retrieval of theological concepts.

Theologians, notes Horkheimer in the late aphorism “Belief and Knowledge,” practice a kind of reflective judgment, for they are moved by desire for the “object” that is revealed and contemplated in the liturgy as the *summum bonum*.¹⁷ The intent of such reflection is not extrinsic purposes taken in hand by the theologian. Rather, the object of the liturgy is contemplated for its own sake. In this regard, “Theology is the opposite of knowledge. ... Knowledge is ultimately governed by purposes. Theology wants to be free of earthly ends.”¹⁸ Not only is the object of theology desired for its own sake, it may not be known as one empirical condition amidst others. Yet while the object of the theologian’s desire is not finally a part of the furniture of experience, reflection upon it nevertheless involves descriptions of empirical conditions. For instance, theology may take the form of reflection on the redemptive events recalled in the liturgy. Yet theology is never the simple depiction of an empirical event but always the expression of a relation between this event and the desired *summum bonum*. Highlighting this affective relation, Horkheimer notes that theology “derives from levels of consciousness where perception was complemented by instincts, impulses, and emotions which are no longer appropriate to contemporary experience, which is served by machines.” In sum, theology reflects upon empirical experiences which are comprehended through the synthetic activity of the understanding (*Verstand*), yet it aspires not merely to reflect upon such experiences *qua* sensory conditions, but to relate them to its

¹⁷ As we shall see in chapter 6, Horkheimer uses the word *Gegenstand* not *Objekt* to reference what is revealed and contemplated in the liturgy, in order to illustrate that YHWH is not one empirical condition amidst others. Neither is God, for Horkheimer, simply “over against” empirical conditions as unknown; rather God is revealed in the liturgy as an active Subject. We will examine these claims in the next chapter.

¹⁸ Horkheimer, “Belief and Knowledge” (1966-1969), in *Dawn and Decline*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 235.

own longing for the unconditioned. Horkheimer thus concludes paradoxically that theology “is both lower and higher than any form of knowledge.”¹⁹

While it is thus perfectly true that the object of the theologian’s desire “cannot be verified” and therefore the language of the theologian “strays about in a labyrinth of pious hopes,” this does not entail the abstract negation of theology. For this straying about, Horkheimer continues wryly, happens to be “something it has in common with all men, provided they can talk at all.”²⁰ What distinguishes theology from other uses of language is not that it contains an affective pull towards a teleological end which exceeds its otherwise (supposedly) pure conceptualizations. Rather, what distinguishes theology is that it *self-consciously* reflects upon this pull, which, as it happens, is reflected in all human speech insofar as it is human. Theology thus simply makes an explicit object of reflection out of a relation that is already implicit in human speech.

The unconditioned is not present immediately to the subject through its sense intuition, and in this regard, of course, the object of theology may be distinguished from the objects of the sciences. Yet following the trajectory of his reflection on language, Horkheimer notes that this does not entail that theological reflection itself is unrelated to the practice of the sciences,

Something ... appears in the questions which are supposed to be answered through the understanding, knowledge, and the sciences [*Verstand, Erkenntnis, Wissenschaft*], which is particularly characteristic of European culture: namely, that an action may have a meaning which is not merely relative, a meaning which we may not be able to examine off-hand with our powers of the understanding [*Verstandeskräften*], but which we also need not simply negate. And it is here I think that the relationship between what occupies theology and the sciences cannot merely be dismissed.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Horkheimer, “Against Philosophy” (1957-1958), in *Dawn and Decline*, 159.

²¹ Horkheimer, “*Die Funktion der Theologie in der Gesellschaft*” (1969), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 311.

If inflection regarding the relation of a given examination of conditions to an intelligible whole cannot simply be expunged from the use of language, neither can it be expunged, notes Horkheimer, from practices of observation. Yet reflection upon such ends self-evidently requires a kind of thought which is distinct from the determining judgment of the understanding that characterizes the practices of the sciences, for what is contemplated is not an empirical condition amidst others. We will return to delimit this difference more precisely; for now it is sufficient to note that, on the one hand, Horkheimer understands theological reflection as intimately related to a necessary feature of human speech and practice, yet on the other, he wishes to distinguish the kind of judgment involved in theology from that which characterizes the sciences, insofar as the two have qualitatively distinct objects.

1. The necessity of retrieving theological concepts

There are two reasons, notes Horkheimer, why the loss of historical theological categories leads to alienation, and thus why their retrieval is necessary for modern subjects. First, while modern subjects wish to see the accounts of practical maxims found in pre-modern traditions preserved in a form adequate to their self-understanding, the attempt by modern philosophers to accomplish this “translation” by portraying practical maxims as products of pure reason has failed (1.1). Second, while subjects expect that the dictates of the sciences will be related to practical ends they have taken as their own, as the use of intelligible categories fades, the practice of the sciences is increasingly understood as autonomous from any such extrinsic end (1.2). If modern subjects are to be satisfied with the form of life they inhabit, there is a need for a retrieval of historical categories in a form appropriate to the modern concern with the role of the subject.

1.1. The ends of Enlightenment

The distinction between theoretical practices of observation and theological reflection as well as their relation may be fruitfully understood in terms of a distinction between “appearance” and “essence,” if what is meant by this is that there is a qualitative difference between judgments regarding the causal conditions for a given social relation and judgments regarding the way a relation reflects the meaning of the whole. For an illustration of how this kind of distinction informs Horkheimer’s reflections, note the following passage,

The substance of the individual remains locked up within himself. His intellectual acts are no longer intrinsically connected with his human essence. They take whatever course the situation may dictate. ... No matter how expertly public opinion may be inquired into, no matter how elaborate the statistical or psychological surroundings, what they reach is always a mechanism, never the human essence.²²

In this passage, Horkheimer contrasts a kind of knowledge which is generated by analytic inquiry into the social psychology of class relations with knowledge regarding the meaning of human life, or the human “essence,” that is inhibited by such relations. The former judgment simply requires the operations of *Verstand*, it is an activity of the social scientist that seeks out the psychological causes that condition particular relations between agents in a capitalist society. By way of contrast, the latter judgment postulates the inhibition of the purpose of such relations, the realization of “human essence,” which supposes, quite apart from any particular account of the psychological conditions underlying a given practice, that the practice has a proper end for the subjects who inhabit it that is presently inhibited. The shape of the latter judgment regarding the way “human essence” is inhibited may certainly relate to inquiry by the analytic sciences. To use Horkheimer’s example, social psychology may describe symptoms of this inhibition in its analysis of particular empirical conditions.

²² Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture” (1941), in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et. al. (New York: Continuum, 1999), 280.

However the teleological account Horkheimer supposes regarding essence is not reducible to any particular analytic description: it contains a speculative surplus, an understanding of the whole which surpasses and situates such description as symptomatic of inhibition. Though this teleological surplus allows a concerned theorist to structure various empirical descriptions of given conditions, the structuring is dependent upon an already presupposed account of the meaning of the whole that is not simply the product of sense-experience.

As we have already noted, the Enlightenment project that Horkheimer is concerned to recover presumes judgments regarding the meaning of the whole that situate its understanding of the practice of the sciences. It is concerned with the practical task of inquiring into and realizing the self-satisfaction of the subject and relates any given set of empirical conditions to this end. In late notes, Horkheimer often explicitly articulates this end,

Our practical philosophy is humanity. That men do not suffer misery, that created beings can develop, *is the purpose of action in general*. ... [T]here is no higher appeal than that to the solidarity with the suffering which must be abolished.

To be intellectually progressive would require a consciousness which, though aware of the transitoriness of the individual subject, yet insists on its uniqueness, and develops a society where it, though insignificant, would be *the purpose of the whole to serve* which would make sense to it for that very reason.²³

Of course, for Horkheimer the meaning of the self-satisfaction of the subject as an end-in-itself only has content for a subject in relation to a confluence of social and psychological factors, and these are themselves dependent on particular historical social constellations. This is one reason why Horkheimer is adamant that the materialist dialectic is never fixed. Nevertheless, in any given historical moment, he wishes to claim that such self-satisfaction

²³ These are two of Horkheimer's aphorisms from *Dawn and Decline*, "Humanity" (1957-1958), 152-153 and "History and the Future of the Individual" (1959-1960), 169, emphasis mine. Cf. "Suum Esse Conservare" (1959-1960), 220.

may be sought as the “truth” of the whole, and this commitment to an intelligible account of essence structures his critical project.

Horkheimer notes that modern philosophy, precisely in postulating such a “futile” unconditioned end-in-itself, both departs from yet also owes a debt to the theological tradition,

Philosophy is the futile attempt to achieve recognition for a kind of knowledge which is more than merely instrumental. It is the attempt to produce truth which not only has no practical purpose but cannot even be used in the ordering and application of the knowledge one has. It is truth as such. Behind it there lies the theological good of eternal salvation which philosophy, the heir of Christianity, made its own.²⁴

Two claims in this passage stand out as particularly relevant for interpreting Horkheimer’s late understanding of the relationship between theological reflection and the ends sought by the Enlightenment. On the one hand, the end sought by philosophy must “achieve recognition” as a result of the attempt to “produce truth” on the part of subjects; it is not merely given to the contemplative subject like a sense-intuition. On the other, behind this fallible pursuit “there lies the theological good of eternal salvation.” Even though they recognize the evolving contingent conditions which situate the content of “self-satisfaction” for subjects, moderns continue to pursue self-satisfaction as an unconditioned, an essence which stands over against empirical appearance, thereby employing in however attenuated a form a distinction once native to the theological tradition.

An earlier aphorism by Horkheimer, “Thought,” illustrates the fine line he is attempting to walk. “Truth” for dissatisfied subjects, he notes, may not be conflated with a taken for granted instrumental end like economic productivity, but neither can it be treated as an object of contemplation detached from active subjectivity,

²⁴ Horkheimer, “Against Philosophy” (1957-1958), 159-160.

It is of course, mistaken to believe that the truth of a theory is the same as its fruitfulness. There are some, however, who appear to assume the opposite. ... They misinterpret every utterance as a final profession of belief, an injunction, or a taboo. They seek to submit to the idea as to a god or attack it as an idol. They lack freedom in relation to it. But it is in the nature of truth that one is involved in it as an active subject. ...

This fetishism manifests itself in a drastic form today. ... For this reason, not only is the utterance which attacks power found intolerable but the one which gropes forward experimentally, playing with the possibility of error. Yet to be unfinished and to know it is the mark even of the thought which opposes power, and especially of the thought for which it would be worth dying.²⁵

Truth is not merely instrumental “fruitfulness” as this is defined by taken for granted social ends in society. Indeed, it may be the purpose of alienated subjects in a context of inquiry to fundamentally inhibit practices which society understands to be productive, for the sake of their own self-realization. Yet it is equally the case that if “truth” is portrayed as self-realization, such an end will not be comprehended merely by passive contemplation. It is the outcome of a process of inquiry and experimentation which discloses a relation between a subject and the world, and should thus not be “fetishized” as an eternal object apart from this qualified relation. As Horkheimer encapsulates his understanding in an essay from the 50s, “Not only does practice depend upon the truth, but truth depends also on the actions of man. This is what the teaching of the primacy of practical reasoning in Kant meant.”²⁶ On the one hand, his emphasis on the activity of the subject and the corresponding definition of truth as a historical relation distinguishes Horkheimer’s understanding of truth from the kind of object desired by the theologian, which, as he portrays it in the aforementioned aphorism, “Belief and Knowledge,” is an end which is entirely distinct from the activity or purposes of the subject. On the other, this desire to realize the self-

²⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, “Thought,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944), trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 203.

²⁶ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer and Society,” 96.

satisfaction of the subject as an end-in-itself itself owes a decisive debt to the theological tradition. For it postulates an “essence” as a meaning of the whole which is distinct from the merely conditional determinations of the subject’s understanding (*Verstand*), even if this essence may only be realized through the inquiring activity of a historical subject. The idea that the subject is both inhibited from realizing its proper end, yet that this inhibition will itself be overcome in history by the activity of the subject, expressed in the Kantian hope in “the progressive awareness of freedom as the motive force behind world history,”²⁷ is itself unthinkable apart from this theological antecedent.

Horkheimer notes that the interest of Enlightenment philosophers in portraying the end of social development as the self-realization of the subject is not to overturn the practical moral teachings of theology, but to place them on new footing. The maxims and ends portrayed by the theological tradition are, according to such philosophers, deducible from self-evident truths by the proper use of reason, understood as faculty autonomous from any particular tradition. As Horkheimer notes,

The concept of God as the Creator, Legislator, and Supreme Judge – the most important maxims for the functioning of society – were to be brought as truths of reason into unison with science. Independent of the endangered thoughts of revelation, its postulates posed as eternal maxims based upon the reflection of thought upon itself. Through such an effort, the philosophical systems of different schools of thought reached an agreement. ... However much Descartes, Leibniz, and even Kant, attached themselves to the hard sciences, the legitimation of the highest religious principles still constituted in their thought a decisive motive, through becoming identified with the concept of reason.²⁸

²⁷ Horkheimer, “The German Jews” (1961), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 112.

²⁸ Horkheimer, “Religion and Philosophy,” 245; trans. modified “*Religion und Philosophie*,” 189.

Horkheimer frequently references this attempted reconciliation of scientific and theological categories in his mature work as characteristic of modern philosophy.²⁹ Yet although the advances in empirical concepts produced by the new sciences were, in fact, a success, the modern attempt to replace the explanation of intelligible concepts offered by the theological tradition with claims regarding their self-evidence failed abjectly. While “the genius of great philosophers ... clearly proves itself in the area of epistemology,” Horkheimer notes, their strongest arguments “chang[e] into a meager combination of possibilities [*in ein bescheidenes Kombinationsvermögen*] while crossing over into a proof of God’s existence.”³⁰

The reason for this, notes Horkheimer, is that concepts of the intelligible (and the aesthetic and practical judgments they allow), are inextricably related to the social practices of memory and anticipation constituting particular religious traditions. They cannot simply be called forth *ex nihilo* by a rational deduction (as for instance, a postulate whose existence is a precondition of the self-evident moral law). Indeed, Kant’s account of practical judgment is problematic, Horkheimer notes, precisely because it abstracts concepts of moral action from their dependency on such traditions, “The teaching that finds the categorical imperative as a supra-empirical fact [*überempirisches Faktum*] in every thinking being,” he begins, “is an absolutization [*verabsolutierung*] of the products of tradition.”³¹ Moral maxims regarding experience are thus not inferred by reference to a categorical law that is self-evident to all rational subjects. Rather, they depend upon descriptions and related habits of judgments which are learned in traditions.

²⁹ For example: “The Soul” (1967), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 54; “Über den Zweifel” (1969), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 214-215; “Observations on the Liberalization of Religion” (1971), in *Frankfurt School on Religion*, 253; “Schopenhauers Denken,” 240; “Pessimismus Heute,” 224-225.

³⁰ Horkheimer, “Pessimismus Heute,” 225. For Horkheimer’s analysis of the inadequacies of various modern proofs, note “Schopenhauer’s Denken,” 241-242; “Über den Zweifel,” 214-215; “Pessimismus Heute,” 225-227; “Observations on the Liberalization of Religion,” 253-254.

³¹ Horkheimer, “Religion and Philosophy” 248; trans. modified: “*Religion und Philosophie*,” 193.

There are two problems Horkheimer has with Kant's attempt to abstract moral judgment from tradition-dependent portrayals of the intelligible. First, Kant's portrayal of the categorical imperative renders problematic the substantive maxims he wishes it to endorse, for there is no necessary reason why the features of an action one chooses to universalize should correspond to the moral code presumed in bourgeois society.

The conviction of Voltaire, "*que dans le Cœur Dieu se grave lui-même*," has a long pre-history and reaches into the meaningful literature of our century. The beautiful confession, also represented by Tolstoy in the *Resurrection*, of morality as the will written by God on the heart, which was called more scientifically "practical reason" by Kant, nevertheless rested upon a hasty induction. Although in every act the educated one is inspired by the belief that in his position he must respond to everyone as himself, reason behaves neutrally toward the categorical imperative. Besides morality, it also will justify actions whose maxims, however untrue, would be suitable to universalize. The categorical imperative that characterized the civilized mentality, by no means characterized reason as such.³²

The argument that universalization could apply to immoral as well as moral acts was consistently used by Horkheimer throughout his career to illustrate the dependency of the judgment of "pure" reason on the character and historical context of the agent doing the judging.³³ What is interesting about this rendition of the argument, however, is his emphasis that the supposedly self-evident correspondence between what is universalizable and the moral law "rest[s] upon a hasty induction;" its acceptance has more to do with the habits of thought that "the educated one" has learned vis-à-vis the cultural transmission of a theological idea than with that which is self-evident to reason.

³² Ibid., 248; trans. modified: "*Religion und Philosophie*," 193-194.

³³ For an early instance, note "Materialism and Morality" (1933), in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 22-23. Habermas traces the origin of the claim to the excurses on "Juliette and Enlightenment" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), and equates it with a "profound skepticism concerning reason" ("To See to Salvage," 134). However the claim that "universalization" is situated by the social and material conditions of the subject is not necessarily skeptical. It is simply an axiom of Horkheimer's materialism, as our study has repeatedly illustrated. It can thus be employed in accounts regarding either why attempts to attain the goal of the Enlightenment have failed, or accounts of what it would take for this goal to be reached. In this context, it is clear that Horkheimer forwards it in a discussion of how best to preserve historical practices of reasoning, not in an attempt to equate all forms of reasoning with instrumental domination.

Second, notes Horkheimer, Kant's abstraction from particular religious traditions renders the motive for obedience to the moral law mute, for only such traditions can provide ends which are able to motivate the desire of subjects to do the practical reflection assumed by Kant. For instance, a wish to proleptically experience the happiness of the coming eschatological age, not an abstract respect for categorical principles as such, situates the obedience of faithful Jews to the torah.

Whoever considers this demand [the categorical imperative] as necessary and true cannot reject the trust that is announced in Psalm 91 as mere arbitrariness. ... Being different from the categorical principles that are ascribed to reason, the thought of refuge as it expresses itself in Psalm 91 awakens not merely obedience but the love for that which is other than the world and which gives meaning to life and the suffering in it.³⁴

Kant's notion of a "duty" arising from respect for the moral law is thus an anemic form of mere obedience where once there had been "love" for the intelligible ends presented by the tradition. The categories of moral judgment, concludes Horkheimer, are thus not extricable from the affective practices of remembrance and anticipation sustained by a tradition.

The reason that one cannot abstract practical concepts from the intelligible ideas learned in religious traditions is thus not because such ideas provide a supra-empirical standpoint (as Habermas supposes), but rather precisely because there is *no such* standpoint to be had. In "absolutizing" a moral maxim as something other than a "product of tradition," one loses both the teleological descriptions which make sense of the maxim, as well as the affective desire necessary to motivate action, rendering the maxim both incoherent and ineffectual. This supposes Horkheimer's argument in *Eclipse: traditions and* the intelligible categories they allow must be preserved, for without them practical and

³⁴ Horkheimer, "Psalm 91" (1968), trans. Michael Ott, in *Marx, Critical Theory, and Religion*, ed. Warren S. Goldstein (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 119.

aesthetic maxims which modern subjects have come to value (such as the idea that the social whole exists for the sake of the subject, who is an end-in-herself), begin to fall out of use.

1.2. The purpose of the sciences

In congruence with his previous reflections on the relationship between early empiricism and the practical goals of the Enlightenment, Horkheimer continues to maintain in his later writing that practical postulates necessarily condition the determinations sought by the practice of the sciences. His concern continues to be that such ends are no longer self-consciously taken to be objects of reflection by modern subjects,

In the progressive specialization not only of the work-life but also of everything including even the sciences, it is necessary to be reminded again and again that not only skills matter, but also, in the end, the truth, the question which Kant already posed – What is truth? What should happen? What should we do? ... There is science [*Wissenschaft*], but there is actually no discipline – indeed, the reasons for this are still too little spoken about – which determines the course of science.³⁵

As we have noted, Horkheimer does not believe such practical ends can be meaningfully understood if they are abstracted from historical traditions and treated as self-evident. Further, practical ends which determine the sciences cannot themselves be scrutinized by the synthesizing activity of the understanding, for they are postulates regarding the meaning of the whole, thus not based in discrete sensory intuitions. The sciences are thus not autodidactic.

Presently, the ends pursued by the sciences do not arise from self-conscious reflection on the practical questions which Horkheimer lists under the heading “the will to truth” (“What is truth? What should happen? What should we do?”). They are rather determined by forces which are unexamined. For instance, Horkheimer notes,

³⁵ Horkheimer, “*Die Funktion der Theologie*,” 314.

How is [science] determined, only by the will to truth? Not at all, but through many factors, which are examined too little. ... The science of physics, the natural sciences as such, even medicine appears to me broadly to be determined by the fact that nations must defend themselves against one another and must produce the necessary instruments for this. Science today is broadly the servant of these needs.³⁶

The practice of the sciences supposes practical goals, whether they be “examined” by an intentional subject or not, and Horkheimer’s fear is that these goals become heteronomous if they remain unexamined or are taken as natural or inevitable. Such forces, he notes, have come to “determin[e] the course of science” though they remain forces which “science does not pay attention to.”³⁷

The self-realization of the subject requires that the practical ends which situate scientific practice be taken up and reflected upon self-consciously. This, Horkheimer notes, is why theology remains important: it provides a model for reflection upon the human purposes implicit in the practice of the sciences, “If science serves today as the basis of a critique of theology, theology ... is able, conversely, to be critical of science and to raise awareness to its true impulses.”³⁸ The reason for this is that postulates regarding the meaning and purpose of human action, or what self-satisfaction might be for humans, postulates which can throw into question the ends presently dictating the practice of the sciences, remain a retrievable provenance of theology, despite the fact that the Kantian attempt to preserve them as autonomous products of reason has failed. Horkheimer thus notes elsewhere that it is only in reflection upon historical traditions that categories like the “Kantian hope” in the realization of a kingdom of ends may be preserved, “What is needed...is a knowledge of

³⁶ Ibid., 314-315.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 315.

the theological tradition, for our grasp of the inextricable meshing of human freedom and its conditionings, as well as the Kantian hope, have their historical roots in that tradition.”³⁹

Such postulates, notes Horkheimer, involve “the will to truth,” which he defines as the desire “to anticipate something of that which is not merely relative” (i.e. circumscribed by the sense-intuition of given conditions), “but rather is absolute” (i.e., postulates regarding the significance of sensory experience for subjects in relation to the meaning of the whole, as Horkheimer’s reference to Kant’s three-fold question in the *Critique of Pure Reason* makes evident).⁴⁰ The ultimate difficulty of retrieval is that the theorist must reflect upon such ends in a form suited to their status as conceptualizations of the intelligible. Horkheimer concludes rather ambiguously with this recognition, “While theology also cannot describe and determine [*beschreiben und bestimmen*] ‘the Intelligible,’ it is at least able to say how what science does not pay attention to should be observed.”⁴¹

Such ends are thus understood by Horkheimer (following Kant) as practical postulates, hopeful or fearful anticipations regarding the meaning of the whole which situate and guide human acts, yet (contra Kant) he holds that they may not be abstracted from the practices of historical traditions and equated with the products of reason. On the one hand, they are speculative ideas, not themselves particular determinations regarding empirical conditions. This is why one may not use practices of observation to “describe” or “determine” an intelligible whole in a way analogous to the scientific description of objects of experience. On the other, it is equally the case, as Horkheimer notes in his reflections on the use of language in “Against Philosophy,” that one is *unable* to be an embodied acting agent without

³⁹ Horkheimer, “The Concept of Man” (1957), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 7.

⁴⁰ Horkheimer, “*Die Funktion der Theologie*,” 315.

⁴¹ Ibid.

the implicit postulation of such wholes. If affective desire or aversion in relation to some account of the meaning of a whole is presupposed by those making theoretical judgments, reflection on such ends as action guiding postulates remains a necessary task for the subject interested in seeing its will reflected in the ends it pursues. A question we will address in the next chapter is how precisely Horkheimer believes that reflection upon such concepts is possible, once their distinction from the judgment of particular sense intuitions has been appreciated.

2. The content of theological concepts: Horkheimer's critique of Tillich

In order to develop Horkheimer's understanding of the way the content of theological concepts ought to be understood and preserved by moderns, it is instructive to survey the way he considers and then rejects two modern attempts to retrieve the significance of theological concepts. As is typical of his style, Horkheimer chooses two apparently diametrically opposed attempts to recover the significance of such concepts, before noting a flawed premise they share that is rooted, he thinks, in the way they abstract the meaning of concepts from the practices of historical traditions. One approach presents the intelligible as a reflection of the highest good; the other, as a dark force that uses human activity as instrumental to its own purposes. Describing the two in tandem, Horkheimer notes,

Schopenhauer's work constituted the last great philosophical attempt to save the core of Christianity. ...

... While Tillich wanted to foresee in the unknown other "God above God," the Higher and Highest, the opposite, as it were, to dreadful reality, for Schopenhauer what is revealed in the world, the absolute, is denounced as the eternal, blind, insatiable will, which everyone serves and belongs to in the end.⁴²

⁴² Horkheimer, "Religion and Philosophy," 246-247; trans. modified: "*Religion und Philosophie*," 191-192.

No matter how different these conceptualizations of the intelligible, each relies on an analogy between a reality revealed by the introspective reflection of the individual and the whole. In Tillich's case, the individual experiences a "depth" to his empirical relations in the world that reflects the unconditioned ground of his existence; for Schopenhauer, the individual infers from the insatiable desires at war within him the nature of the unconditioned that generates the whole. In either case, the individual discerns the content of such concepts on the basis of its own reflection on experience, not as a social practice of description learned in community. I will first examine the way Horkheimer critiques this shared premise in his reflections on Tillich, before turning to his mature critique and appropriation of the work of Schopenhauer.

Before proceeding with an examination of Horkheimer's relationship to Tillich and Schopenhauer, it is worth noting that this strategy stands in basic continuity with Horkheimer's reflection on intelligible concepts in *Eclipse*. In that work, Horkheimer praises pre-critical accounts of the intelligible insofar as they recognize that an intimate relationship exists between the subject's experience of empirical conditions and the shape of its consequent conceptualizations of the intelligible. Thus, for instance, he admires the way Aquinas relates claims regarding the intelligible to the observational practices taken for granted by the Aristotelian sciences. He contrasts this sharply with modern metaphysical revivals, which disconnect the disclosure of the intelligible from the experience of empirical conditions, by portraying it as an immediate intuition regarding the whole, not an inference drawn from the experience of particular conditions. As we shall see, he holds that both Tillich and Schopenhauer have this positive trait in common with pre-critical metaphysics: they both tether their postulations to an aspect of experience that may be appealed to by the

subject as a basis for its account of the whole. Yet, just as in *Eclipse*, this appreciation does not signal unqualified approbation: concepts of the intelligible, Horkheimer maintains, are not self-evident inferences from particular sense-experiences; rather, they are learned social practices that rely on the shared self-understanding of the members of a historical tradition. This is why intelligible concepts develop in relation to the historical experience of subjects and why they may, in fact, be lost.

Horkheimer's personal friendship with the Tillichs is well-known.⁴³ Nevertheless he repeatedly expresses reservations regarding Tillich's understanding of theological concepts. While Horkheimer agrees with Tillich that the preservation of conceptualizations of the intelligible is necessary if the self-satisfaction of the modern subject is to be realized, the two do not understand the content of such concepts in the same way. According to Horkheimer, Tillich wishes to treat conceptualizations of the intelligible as reflections of a universal human experience that may be separated from their historical development as practices of description arising in particular traditions.

In "Theism and Atheism" (1963), his most developed engagement with Tillich's ideas, Horkheimer begins by developing his own understanding of the content of theological categories, before comparing this with John Robinson's influential popularization of Tillich in *Honest to God*. Horkheimer intentionally situates his own understanding of theological concepts as a repair of a metaphysical "rule" which he believes informs both Protestant theism and Enlightenment atheism. The "metaphysical materialism" of the French Enlightenment emerged as a critique, he notes, of the "Absolute of the theologians."⁴⁴ Yet

⁴³ For instance, note his personal tribute to Tillich in "*Letzte Spur von Theologie – Paul Tillichs Vermächtnis*" (1966), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 270.

⁴⁴ Horkheimer, "Theism and Atheism," in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 41.

its account of the justification of practical action mirrors its original object of critique.

After quoting the French *philosophe* d'Holbach at length, Horkheimer concludes that his materialism simply replaces the *Deus absconditus* of the Protestants with "Nature,"

There is nothing outside her; she is one and all at once. Man shall discover her laws, admire her inexhaustible energy, use his discoveries for his own happiness, and resign himself to his ignorance of her last, her ultimate causes, which are impenetrable. With his whole being man belongs to her. The abstract entity, which, according to such materialists, forms the basis of right conduct is as indeterminate as the *Deus absconditus* of the Protestants, and the promise of happiness in this world is as problematical as bliss in the next, which is extremely uncertain.⁴⁵

On the one hand, for d'Holbach "Nature" is self-contained: all creatures depend upon it for their particular being, form, and final end, yet it is itself contingent upon nothing. Yet any justification for the outworking of this "abstract entity" is impossible (thus its impenetrability to reason parallels the *Deus absconditus*). On the other hand, in tension, this will is the basis for describing the normative significance of the actions of human beings, "In the name of Nature, the enlightened Holbach calls for the defense of one's country not only against external enemies but against internal tyrants."⁴⁶ This rehearses a theological assumption, the identification of the highest being with the good, yet it also construes this being as finally "impenetrable" in a way that makes this appeal anything but self-evident.

In drawing the parallel between Enlightenment materialists and the theological object of their critique, Horkheimer wishes to highlight the way the equation of the most permanent and powerful being with the good is taken for granted by both and used as a self-evident basis for practical reasoning, "The naturalistic doctrine agrees with the theological doctrine it opposes in identifying what is most permanent and powerful with what is most exalted

⁴⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

and worthy of love—as if this were a matter of course.”⁴⁷ Echoing Nietzsche, Horkheimer flatly denies this equation,

The ancient materialists were still inclined to stop with a plurality of atoms; the worshippers of Nature, like the pantheists, ontologists, and theologians, will hear of nothing less than the One. But Nature does not say anything, as little as Being, which has been tried recently and which is supposed to deliver its oracles through the mouths of professors. The place of God is taken in each case by an impersonal concept. The Scholastics had already depersonalized the humanity and individuality of the murdered Jesus by multiplying them into the Oneness of God. The *ipsum esse*, the true identity of the divinity, his humanity could hardly be distinguished any longer from the radiant Being of the neo-Platonists, because of the ceaseless interpretation of being and being-in-the world—the unity of essence and existence—in which all differences disappeared. When they build a system, theists and atheists alike posit an entity at the top. The dogma of a Nature which can speak and command—or at least serve as a principle for deducing moral truths—was an inadequate attempt to go along with science without giving up the age-old longing for an eternal guideline.⁴⁸

We shall have to leave aside the question of whether Horkheimer is accurate in his sweeping characterization of the speculation of the scholastics. For our purposes, it is only necessary to note that his argument supposes that atheist and theist forms of metaphysics have in common the idea that what is “natural,” most powerful, or necessary is at the same time the good. Further, this equation is not simply the mistake of atheist critics or modern theologians, but is, for Horkheimer, characteristic of the development of theological metaphysics itself.

Horkheimer maintains, by contrast, that this equation is far from self-evident: he describes normative values as the ephemeral product of a historical process, not reflections of the unconditioned. Thus he summarizes in a contemporaneous aphorism, “The philosophers were wrong to believe that truth is what is most stable, most solid, most

⁴⁷ Ibid., 42-43.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

dependable. It is the vanishing moment, appearance, or so it seems to me.”⁴⁹ Moral truths like justice are not rooted in a self-evident fact of reason. What counts as human “dignity” for moderns, as a basis for their judgments of equity, is rather the self-conscious appropriation of a concept that had, in a previous historical moment, distinguished nobles from the masses and undergirded feudal relations of subjugation. This is subsequently taken up by subjects in a distinct form, who extend it to a broader class of subjects in resistance against this institution.⁵⁰

Contemporary theists influenced by Tillich, however, embrace the equation of the real and the good as well, treating the longing found in religious practices as the experience of an intelligible ground of human relations, an origin on which such relations depend that is, at the same time, the highest good towards which they are oriented. Horkheimer thus summarizes Robinson’s translation of Tillich’s metaphysics as follows,

When the New Testament tells us that God was in Christ and that the Word was God, this only means according to Robinson that God is the ultimate “depth” of our being, the unconditional within the conditioned. The so-called “transcendent”—God, love, or whatever name we might give it—is not “outside” but is to be found in with and below the Thou of all finite relationships as their ultimate depth, their ground, their meaning. But if we must talk of the ultimate, then Schopenhauer was closer to the truth when he denounced it in each creature as the instinct for self-preservation, the will to be and to be well. And even though theism is sacrificed for an anti-dogmatic attitude, the rejected view is being presupposed in a perfectly naïve way.⁵¹

Horkheimer’s governing interest in the passage is not to contrast Schopenhauer’s account of intuitive experience with Robinson’s (though if forced to choose, as we shall see, he would undoubtedly prefer the former). Rather, the passage points out a claim that critics of traditional theism like Robinson share in common with their target, the idea that that one

⁴⁹ Horkheimer, “The Three Mistakes of Marx” (1957-1958), in *Dawn and Decline*, 157.

⁵⁰ I discuss Horkheimer’s account of “dignity” in chapter 4, section 3.

⁵¹ Horkheimer, “Theism and Atheism,” 47.

may infer from an intuitive experience an “eternal” truth underlying empirical conditions, which can serve in turn as a stable basis for practical judgment. Both Robinson and traditional theistic metaphysics hold this premise, which is why Horkheimer concludes that “the rejected view” of the latter “is being presupposed in a perfectly naïve way” by the former.

The statement that immediately follows, “Truth—eternal truth outlasting human error—cannot as such be separated from theism. The only alternative is positivism, with which the latest theology is in accord irrespective of contradictions,” a formulation which many have taken to express Horkheimer’s commitment to classical adequation, should be understood in this context.⁵² It is not a claim intended to defend a classic conception of adequation, as if the most basic contrast in the essay were between traditional theological metaphysics (on the one hand) and positivism and modern theological liberalism (on the other). If such were the case, Horkheimer would not have prefaced the discussion by a history of the recapitulations of a way of conceiving of truth, a way supposed in common by medieval forms of philosophical theism, its Enlightenment critics, and modern theologians alike. The center of gravity for the essay is a critique of various attempts to discard traditional theological metaphysics, each of which unconsciously reproduces its cardinal tenet, the notion that truth depends upon an unconditioned ground. It is not a defense of one particular variation of this metaphysics over the others.

Thus after the aforementioned either/or between theism and positivism, Horkheimer returns to critique the account of the intelligible found in Robinson for reproducing the

⁵² Ibid., 47. Habermas, for instance, claims that such expressions affirm “the classical concept of truth as *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*” (“To Seek to Salvage,” 141).

error of the theism it replaces (much as, according to him, the *deus absconditus* reproduced the error of scholastic metaphysicians),

Having retreated to their last position, Protestant theologians, unconscious of this philosophical dilemma, try to rescue the idea that the life of each individual has its own meaning. It is essential for life in this world to mean something more than this world. What more? Their answer is: Love. ... But love as an abstraction—as it appears in recent writings—remains as obscure as the hidden God whom it is supposed to replace.⁵³

In the broader context, the either/or is thus better understood as a counterfactual: if one has assumed the account of normativity Horkheimer has subjected to critique, one may either claim with the theist that the truth of an act requires a relation between it and an intuited ground of being (in so doing, one will reproduce, however unconsciously, classic theistic metaphysics), or one may argue against the theist that the idea of a such normative judgment is meaningless because the concept of the unconditioned has no content that may be experienced as a sense-intuition (the negation of intelligible concepts offered by the positivist). Yet Horkheimer's word for this is a "dilemma," he is not advocating one or the other side.

Horkheimer notes that in either case, the acceptance of theism or the rejection of positivism, intelligible concepts are understood to be products of a self-evident universal intuition that provides access to that which underlies and directs empirical conditions. Instead of accepting this premise, he argues for a different way of conceiving of theological concepts of the unconditioned. Such concepts are not products of immediate intuition, rather they are historically developing social practices of description. As such, they are tied to practices of remembrance and hope learned by subjects in a community and are always inflected by the projects and affective states of such subjects. Horkheimer presents his

⁵³ Ibid., 48.

alternative account in the concluding paragraphs of the essay, terming theological reflection “the longing for something other than this world” and “the standing apart from existing conditions.”⁵⁴ In order to clarify what is intended by this ambiguous language, he develops a contrast between eschatological “longing” (on the one hand) and *both* a dominant form of atheism (characterizing the communist states of his time) as well as a form of philosophical theology that rests upon the self-evidence of immediate intuitions.

Atheism, during the early Enlightenment, he notes, “was ... a sign of inner independence and incredible courage, and it continues to be one in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian countries where it is regarded as a symptom of the hated liberal spirit.”⁵⁵ Here we may recall Horkheimer’s praise of the early empiricists and French *encyclopédistes*, who subjected the justifications of feudal institutions to sustained critique to redress the alienation of their subjects. Yet the significance of “atheism” much like the significance of these early progenitors of positivism has changed as the historical conditions informing social practices have also changed. In Horkheimer’s historical moment, “atheism” as a doctrine no longer signified the self-reflective critique of institutions for the sake of the subjects inhabiting them. In the Soviet Bloc, it had become the ally of a nationalism which broached no dissent; thus it played a part in the ideological justification of institutions that repressed their subjects.

At a time when both the national socialists and the nationalistic communists despised the Christian faith, a man like Robespierre, the disciple of Rousseau, but not a man like Voltaire, would also have become an atheist and declared nationalism as a religion. Nowadays atheism is in fact the attitude of those who follow whatever power happens to be dominant, no matter whether they pay lip-service to a religion or whether they can afford to disavow it openly.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid., 50.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 50.

The parallel with Horkheimer's analysis of Comte's conservative transmogrification of the earlier Enlightenment goals of empiricism is striking.⁵⁷

If one may not speak of the content of the concept "atheism" without historical qualification, this is equally so with theism. Yet much as he refuses to equate past forms of atheism with the present content of the concept in totalitarian states, Horkheimer refuses to equate the continuing significance of theology in modern life with its earlier forms, thus "theism is again an actual force in the period of its decline."⁵⁸

In order to explain this claim, Horkheimer recalls his earlier depiction in *Eclipse* of the sublation of antique self-mastery in the medieval vision of *caritas*, a vision supposed implicitly by the humane critique of the aforementioned Enlightenment atheists. In *Eclipse*, Horkheimer had argued that the Christian idea of the soul extended the temporal horizon supposed by antique self-mastery to eternity and thus enabled the subject to balance the immediate sacrifice and self-denial asked of her for the sake of others with the hope of an eventual redemption of such suffering in a future where justice and love embrace.⁵⁹ In "Theism and Atheism" he concludes regarding this sublation,

Such selflessness [expressed by the theistic command to love one's neighbor and all created things], such a sublimation of self-love into love of others had its origin in Europe in the Judeo-Christian idea that truth, love and justice were one The necessary connection between the theistic tradition and the overcoming of self-seeking becomes very much clearer to a reflective thinker of our time than it was to the critics of religion in by-gone days.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Cf. chapter 4, section 2.1.

⁵⁸ Horkheimer, "Theism and Atheism," 49.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of Horkheimer's original presentation of this idea in *Eclipse*, note chapter 4, section 2.2.1.

⁶⁰ Horkheimer, "Theism and Atheism," 50.

Theists in totalitarian states, notes Horkheimer, remain faithful to this historical vision of *caritas* as well as the infinite worth of the individual it supposes, in the midst of its threatened demise,

Those who resist the prevailing wind are trying to hold on to what was once the spiritual basis of the civilization to which they still belong. This is hardly what the philosophical ‘theists’ had in mind: the conception of a divine guarantor of the laws of nature. It is on the contrary the thought of something other than the world, something over which the fixed rules of nature, the perennial source of doom, have no dominion.⁶¹

The “longing” for that which is other than this world is therefore the hope for future justice, as well as the proleptic participation in this future through the practice of *caritas*. This supposes an eschatological dimension lacking in classical philosophical theology: it does not reference an intuition arising from the patterns of experience characterizing the present age; rather it offers a portrayal and proleptic embodiment of a not-yet realized future that is perhaps *least* evident to subjects on the basis of their immediate experience. Thus it may only be maintained, Horkheimer will argue later, through a significant and self-conscious effort, by liturgical practices of historical remembrance, proleptic participation, and future hope. While this attempt to offer an alternative way of understanding an intelligible claim is an unclarified hint in “Theism and Atheism,” it signals an idea that Horkheimer will significantly develop in his own reflections on Jewish eschatology.

Elsewhere the idea is explicitly related by him to a critique of Tillich. Intelligible concepts are not preserved by a people because subjects in subsequent generations understand them as symbolic reflections of a universal human condition. Rather, such concepts are preserved because members in a historical form of life continue to hold fast to the meaningfulness of such historical concepts in relation to the contemporary experiences

⁶¹ Ibid.

of the community. Thus in speaking of his understanding of the Psalms, Horkheimer resists attempts to abstract what is communicated regarding the coming of the day of the Lord from the past experience of exile and the present situation of persecution faced by the Jewish people. The motive for this kind of abstraction, one towards which he expresses significant sympathy, is to “mitigate the crass opposition in the biblical teaching ... of the antagonism between the goodness of God and the unjust, malevolent horror in reality.” If the Psalms express the continued longing of an exiled and persecuted people, the fact that it has yet to be realized is difficult to reconcile with the character of YHWH. Yet, Horkheimer concludes, “Not to speak of the logical problematic of the notion of symbol ... it seems to me to be decisive that the Psalms witness a need, a devotion to the good, which itself is truly not symbolical.”⁶² The declarations of Psalm 91 thus disclose, not an intuited depth behind empirical reality, but rather a hope for the immanent in-breaking of justice that is based in the history of a particular people and appropriated in the midst of present opposition in anticipation of the future.

3. Rules for preserving theological concepts: Horkheimer’s appropriation of Schopenhauer

From one perspective, notes Horkheimer, Schopenhauer’s thought “corresponds with Tillich.” For instance, in his reflection on biblical myth, Schopenhauer “anticipated the symbolism which Tillich unfolded in a differentiated way.”⁶³ Yet, while Horkheimer is content to treat Tillich’s work as a polemical foil for his own account of the content of intelligible concepts, his relationship to Schopenhauer’s philosophy is considerably more complex. Schopenhauer’s work had a pervasive, if implicit, influence on Horkheimer from

⁶² Horkheimer, “Psalm 91” 119. For a parallel assessment of Tillich, note “A Weakness of Theology” (1961-1962) in *Dawn and Decline*, 219-220.

⁶³ Horkheimer, “Religion and Philosophy,” 246; trans. modified: “*Religion und Philosophie*,” 191.

his earliest writings.⁶⁴ Thus it is unsurprising that he handles Schopenhauer's thought with considerably more care, reflecting on his work not merely as an object of critique but also as a set of insights regarding the significance of individual experience for preserving concepts of the intelligible. However, this latter set of insights, he maintains, may be distinguished from Schopenhauer's own account of the content of the intelligible. Suitably understood, Schopenhauer's style may thus be rendered serviceable for those wishing to preserve the significance of theological concepts for modern life, even if his own account of the content of the intelligible is eschewed.

3.1. The juxtaposition of style and content

As we have noted, a leitmotif in Horkheimer's work is his refusal to avert his gaze from the alienation of the suffering individual through any appeal that justifies suffering in relation to a taken for granted account of the whole. The point of his critique of metaphysics, we have argued, is not to negate intelligible concepts as such, but rather to criticize any attempt to treat such concepts as reflections of a self-event authority that stands over against the judgment of the subject on the basis of its sensuous experience. This "intransigent nominalism," with its focus on the affective embodied states of subjects, is perhaps the central debt Horkheimer owes to Schopenhauer, and he turns to reflect upon it at length in his first lecture before the *Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft*,

In Schopenhauer's intransigent nominalism in the face of society ... lies at the same time the root of his greatness. Just as in nature genera are bare abstractions, he says, 'so in the human race only the individuals and their course of life are real, the nations and their lives are mere abstractions.' He denies the existence of the collective and insists on living individual entities, on man and animal with their needs and passions, their striving after existence [*Dasein*] and well-being, and their misery.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ For a recognition of this early debt, note Horkheimer, "Preface," in *Critical Theory*, ix.

⁶⁵ Horkheimer, "Schopenhauer and Society," 89-90, quoting Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Grisebach, vol. II (Leipzig o.J.), 519.

Later in the lecture he continues this thought, juxtaposing Schopenhauer's "tone" and "style" with the explicit content of his philosophy,

No linguistic gesture that feigns at depth in order to render meaninglessness and death meaningful by a sleight-of-hand, no theology of Nothingness, no replacement of the philosophy of history through a historicization of Being, in which the victims do not appear and the hangmen hide themselves – none of this would be compatible with the clear tone of Schopenhauer's writings. As much as he maintains the thesis of the unalterability of suffering and nastiness, and as much as he stresses the uselessness of protest, his style forms in equal measure a singular protest against the fact that it is so.⁶⁶

Despite Horkheimer's evident appreciation for Schopenhauer, his conclusion is cautious:

Schopenhauer's style, his focus on the sensuous individual and his refusal to place the absurdity of suffering in relation to a meaningful whole, is worthy of emulation. Yet this style is a "singular protest" against the way Schopenhauer develops his own metaphysics in his theoretical philosophy, *The World as Will and Representation*.

Horkheimer deftly navigates both sides of the form-content juxtaposition in appropriating Schopenhauer for his own concerns. For instance, in an aphorism which turns from Schopenhauer's theoretical work to examine his practical moral philosophy, Horkheimer notes that while he was correct in *On the Basis of Morality* to postulate "compassion" as "the foundation of the good," the style of his writing belies any emancipatory element made possible by the content of this practical axiom, "The evil pathos that everything that happens to life is no more than it deserves is a peculiarity of his lucid style. ... Precisely because it moralizes, his language contradicts the morality it proclaims."⁶⁷ The juxtaposition of style and content which Horkheimer had used to interpret Schopenhauer's theoretical reflection is thus turned on its head in an analysis of

⁶⁶ Ibid., 90-91.

⁶⁷ Horkheimer, "Schopenhauer the Bourgeois" (1957-1958), in *Dawn and Decline*, 188.

his practical work. In such passages, Horkheimer's appropriation of Schopenhauer is infused with an irony that betrays a decisively negative attitude towards the latter's metaphysics of the will.

3.2. Diversity and development in the Schopenhauer Lectures

In his first lecture, "Schopenhauer and Society," Horkheimer develops a careful critique of the basic premise of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, the notion that there is an analogy between the inner states of individuals, known by self-reflection on instinctual and biological drives, and the intelligible structure of the whole. The inner state of a subject, Horkheimer notes, does not exist apart from and is in fact always already expressed in a way that is mediated by social and political practices. He thus expresses a preference for Hegel's account of the relation between the social whole and the individual, in which "society counts as a sphere of its own structure and energy that mediates state and individual as well as individuals among one another." At the same time, he notes, Hegel is careful to emphasize that social practices are mediated by both the particular embodied states of individuals as well as the political institutions characterizing the whole, "each individual is no less determined by society than by nature and the state."⁶⁸ For Schopenhauer by contrast, the object of reflection is not a mutually constitutive relationship between social and political practices (on the one hand) and nature (on the other), but is rather simply inner nature hypostatized as an ineluctable determinant of the agent and all of her socio-political practices.⁶⁹ Schopenhauer thus privileges the inner experience of instinct studied

⁶⁸ Horkheimer, "Schopenhauer and Society," 87.

⁶⁹ Horkheimer distinguishes between three nodes of a trialectic in Hegel: society, politics, and nature. Our argument focuses on the relationship between "social practices," more broadly construed as encompassing the first two nodes, and "nature." Thus we will refer to social and political practices together simply as "social practices" or "social relations."

by psychology, instead of understanding it as arising from and reflecting back upon the intersection between embodiment and social relations.

As particles of matter are controlled by mechanical laws, so the relation of the individual is controlled through psychological ones. Society is held together through the psychological mechanism of anxiety and aggression, in which caution at times come to assist. Since education according to Schopenhauer ... only concerns the intellect and not character, it is clear that this essence of society cannot be changed. Like all thinkers who do not strive to understand the dark sides of the human psyche in their connection with the social whole, but rather directly hypostasize them as eternal characteristics, as a natural condition, Schopenhauer believes in the endless continuance and naturalness of an essentially repressive society.⁷⁰

While, as we have seen, Horkheimer wants to affirm Schopenhauer's nominalist concern with the experience of individuals as well as the critique of transfiguring teleologies, he refuses to accept the notion that the human psyche may be abstracted from the social practices which give rise to it, that it may be known as a discrete force apart from such social mediation through mere introspection, and that it may, in turn, be conflated as the efficient cause of social processes. Given the way Horkheimer's later work is often misunderstood as a straight-forward affirmation of Schopenhauer, it is worth noting his careful attempt to differentiate his own understanding from this mistaken abstraction and conflation,

The totality of social relations currently constitutes itself as a reality with its own lawfulness. It is the society that reproduces itself and changes because of individuals joined by social relations and not the thinking individual isolated from this society that grants provision and protection in their determined distribution and gradation. It is individuals and groups – which fulfill a function given them arising from the interplay of forces determining the whole and, indeed, realize a differentiated effect according to their place in society – not independent affects and ideas [*unabhängige Affekte und Vorstellungen*] that underlie the institutions that are decisive for right and wrong. ...

⁷⁰ Horkheimer, "Schopenhauer and Society," 87. Horkheimer continues by noting various ways that the practices of Schopenhauer's own economic and social whole thoroughly condition his own presentation of the unconditioned (88-89, 91-92).

Just as little as psychological laws are derived from the social ... do social laws follow from the psychological. The interplay of both, like that of the individual and society, is different in every epoch, indeed, in every historical moment.⁷¹

Even in the midst of this critique, Horkheimer is careful to conclude that while there is no supra-personal entity that underlies social relations, neither may affective experiences themselves simply be reduced to expressions of social relations without noting the way they express the particular experience of the agents who inhabit such relations. Schopenhauer's psychologism, he notes, is no less damaging than a sociological reductionism that claims that the biological and psychological states of individuals are merely derivative of the social practices they participate in, as if individuals cannot come to feel dissonance arising from their own experience of embodied biological and instinctual needs in relation to the practices they inhabit, "‘psychologism’ carries as little standing as the social universalism of every type."⁷²

Horkheimer thus assumes, following Hegel's account in the *Phenomenology*, that the relationship between the sociality of a practice and the embodied desires of the agent who inhabits the practice are mutually constitutive and may be related as equally basic elements making up the practice. He therefore concludes the previously cited passage in a way reminiscent of his reflections on empirical research as a critical activity in the 40s: the "‘psychic mechanisms’" of individuals are mediated "differently in distinct social wholes," he notes, such that this relationship may not be specified ahead of concrete socio-historical investigation into the practical activity of subjects in various historical moments. Without such inquiry, all theory, including Schopenhauer's pessimism, "remains abstract."⁷³

⁷¹ Ibid., 95-96; trans. modified: "*Schopenhauer und die Gesellschaft*," in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 53-54.

⁷² Ibid., 96. For a similar expression of this mutual relation, note Horkheimer, "The Concept of Man," 14-15.

⁷³ Ibid.

As one appreciates the nuances of this critique, the idea that Horkheimer would wish to simply appropriate Schopenhauer's metaphysics as a ground for social critique becomes increasingly implausible. Yet it would be mistaken to assume that Horkheimer's perspective remains static over the almost two decades during which he offers the other Schopenhauer Lectures. To take a singular example of the tension that becomes evident upon surveying the lectures in their entirety, note the way Horkheimer concludes his fifth and final lecture, "*Schopenhauers Denken im Verhältnis zu Wissenschaft und Religion*." Rather than repeating his earlier critique of Schopenhauer's conception of the intelligible, Horkheimer notes that "his metaphysics offers the deepest basis [*Begründung*] for morality, without coming into contradiction with exact scientific knowledge" and "without the idea of a transcendent, eternal, good or evil spirit." Sensing the ambiguity inherent in this formulation (for what precisely *would* be Schopenhauer's basis for morality once one removes the idea of the "eternal" will to which Horkheimer alludes?), he clarifies as follows. Schopenhauer's idea, that "each person is one with the weakest being" may be taken as a "hunch" which "points to [*Ahnung...weist auf*] the identity of living things as such, and may give reason for [*vermag...zu begründen*] the solidarity of all creatures long before death."⁷⁴ Notwithstanding the care taken by Horkheimer to distinguish Schopenhauer's account of the will from his "hunch" regarding the identification of all with the weakest one, this text has served for Habermas as an encapsulation of Horkheimer's late turn to Schopenhauer's metaphysics as a pessimistic "ontological anchoring of truth."⁷⁵ For Horkheimer, he concludes, "only insight into the identity of all life, into a unitary ground of being, even if it be irrational, in

⁷⁴ Horkheimer, "*Schopenhauer's Denken*," 252.

⁷⁵ Habermas "To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning," 140.

which all individual appearances are brought into harmony with one another, ‘can ground solidarity with all creatures long before death.’”⁷⁶

Allowing the dissonance between the first and last Schopenhauer lectures to remain unresolved for the moment, it is worth noting a commonality between the lectures. In Horkheimer’s first lecture, we have noted, he argues at length that Schopenhauer essentializes social practices as mere reflections of the will. In later lectures, he does not depart from this straightforward critique but continues to affirm that Schopenhauer’s metaphysics “implies [*einschließen*] fatalism” and “signifies resignation in a certain sense.”⁷⁷ Indeed, in *Schopenhauers Denken*, Horkheimer goes so far as to note a parallel between Schopenhauer’s theoretical philosophy and the bracketing of the experience of the subject exemplified by positivist philosophies of science,

The relationship of Schopenhauerian pessimism to positivism, the philosophical absolutization of science, the identification of its knowledge with truth itself, is difficult to determine, as much as he himself stressed the difference. The nullification of the human [*die menschliche Nichtigkeit*] follows from both the scientific knowledge of nature as well as from his own philosophy.⁷⁸

This, he concludes, “translate[s] the nullity of the individual into a transcendental.”⁷⁹ When Horkheimer thus proceeds to conclude the essay by noting that Schopenhauer’s “hunch” regarding the unity of all with the weakest one should be preserved in a way distinct from his account of an “evil” will, this demonstrates, minimally, that however much he may wish to offer an account of intelligible unity that bears a relation to Schopenhauer’s, he also wishes to sharply distinguish his own account from a mere affirmation of the latter’s

⁷⁶ Ibid., 141.

⁷⁷ Horkheimer, “Religion and Philosophy,” 248; trans. modified: “*Religion und Philosophie*,” 194.

⁷⁸ Horkheimer, “*Schopenhauer’s Denken*,” 243.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 248.

metaphysics. If there is admiration here, it is certainly qualified. What then does it signify, and how does it relate to Horkheimer's concern with theological reasoning?

3.3. Schopenhauer in the service of liturgical reasoning

Instead of simply subjecting Schopenhauer's account of the will to a sustained Hegelian critique or treating it as a foil for his own account (as in the case of Tillich), Horkheimer argues in his late reflections that there are two ways in which the Schopenhauer's reasoning regarding the intelligible may be recovered in a form free from his substantive conclusions. Understanding this selective retrieval of Schopenhauer style will enable us to better appreciate how the affirmation of Schopenhauer's "hunch" regarding the basis of morality in "*Schopenhauers Denken*" is congruent with Horkheimer's persistent critique of the latter's metaphysics of the will. More importantly, it will illustrate the significance Schopenhauer's style of reasoning holds for attempts to preserve the continuing significance of historical categories for subjects in the face of new disruptive experiences.

In his theoretical philosophy, on the one hand, notes Horkheimer, Schopenhauer attempts to place the experience of the suffering one at the center of his reasoning regarding the shape of the intelligible instead of subsuming this experience as an instance of an already meaningful whole. This demonstrates, for Horkheimer, how the experience of subjects may be related to concepts of the intelligible through a practice of reflective and not subsumptive reasoning. In his practical philosophy, on the other, Schopenhauer severs the intuitive equation of the real and the good in conceptualizations of the intelligible, and attempts to reason regarding moral maxims instead on the basis of the ephemeral experience of affective embodiment. This demonstrates the fragility of judgments regarding the good (they are dependent upon sensuous experience, thus not self-evident to reason).

Horkheimer thus wishes to affirm Schopenhauer's unbending focus on the historical experience of the suffering one as a basis for disclosing the meaning of the whole and his related refusal to countenance a self-evident basis from which to infer practical maxims apart from such experience. His intent is not to affirm Schopenhauer's particular account of the intelligible, but rather to extract in his reflections on Schopenhauer a particular way of reasoning regarding the intelligible.

3.3.1. The relationship between experience and intelligible concepts in Schopenhauer's theoretical philosophy

Horkheimer maintains, in accord with his understanding of Kantian idealism, that human concepts are fitted to the task of comprehending sense-intuitions. The unconditioned is not a possible object of experience, thus to conceive of it as if one could directly intuit it in a way akin to empirical sensations is a category mistake. Nevertheless, Horkheimer expresses an abiding appreciation for the analogy upon which Schopenhauer's particular variant of this mistake is built when compared to other attempts to postulate the immediate experience of the intelligible. While metaphysicians, he notes, often begin with an intuition of an intelligible structure and then infer the meaning of the particular according to its relation to this whole, Schopenhauer's style of reasoning inverts this subsumption: it postulates the meaning of the whole on the basis of the sensuous experience of the subject. This allows the stark alienation of the subject in the face of its social reality to be emphasized in grotesque form, writ large as it were, as an intelligible postulate regarding the falsity of the whole. In the midst of his critique of the content of Schopenhauer's intelligible in "Schopenhauer in Society," Horkheimer thus approves of the latter's inversion of traditional methods of reasoning from the meaning of the whole to the meaningfulness of the particular,

In the presentation of his doctrine it has been well noted that he describes the will to happiness as blind and insatiable. Fewer, however, have noticed that he did not measure merely the universe by this happiness, but also the intelligible order. ... Schopenhauer's philosophy ... withheld from reality the honor of embedding it in a gold-mine of eternity.⁸⁰

Instead of measuring the universe on the basis of a transfiguring intelligible, Schopenhauer measures the intelligible on the basis of the subject's alienated experience of the universe and portrays it as harsh.

In a later aphorism, "Schopenhauer as Optimist," Horkheimer similarly characterizes Schopenhauer's attempt to develop an account of the intelligible on the basis of the alienated experience of the subject – which he terms the subject's "interpretation of the inner nature of all beings by analogy to the experience of his own" – as "a truly illuminating thought," later put to fruitful use by metaphysicians as diverse as Leibniz and Bergson.⁸¹ Schopenhauer's style, expressed in his focus on the experience of the sensuous subject as a basis for reasoning regarding the intelligible, is thus, Horkheimer thinks, a unique advance over previous forms of metaphysics. Yet he concludes that this advance by no means justifies Schopenhauer's treatment of the intelligible as an object of experience, for "the application of categorical structures such as 'my' and 'your' noumenal character, beginning and end, guilt and unity, to the Beyond to which categories have no relevance, is a dream."⁸² Horkheimer thus affirms Schopenhauer's inversion of Hegel's famous postulate "the whole is the true," not as a thesis regarding the content of the will in-itself, but rather as a way of reasoning about the relation between the experience of a subject and the intelligible.

⁸⁰ Horkheimer, "Schopenhauer and Society," 90.

⁸¹ Horkheimer, "Schopenhauer as Optimist" (1961-1962), in *Dawn and Decline*, 218.

⁸² Ibid.

As we will examine in the next chapter, Horkheimer argues that the liturgy of a community expresses the relation between the embodied experience of a people and the intelligible descriptions they have taken as their own, so that such practices do not simply subsume or place the experience of the subject in terms of the meaning of intelligible concepts, but facilitate the reflective reconstruction of concepts on the basis of the continuing historical experience of the people. Schopenhauer's way of conceiving of the sensuous experience of the subject as the basis for reasoning regarding the intelligible thus presents a rule that will guide Horkheimer in his attempt to recover the significance of the liturgy for modern attempts to reason about intelligible concepts, despite the fact that his way of conceiving of the intelligible as an object of experience is mistaken.

3.3.2. The relationship between experience and practical maxims in Schopenhauer's moral philosophy

In a parallel way, Horkheimer argues that the basic recognition underlying Schopenhauer's practical philosophy, the idea that the real and the good are not self-evidently connected, and the consequent attempt to reason regarding the latter on the basis of the ephemeral and contingent experience of compassion, can be separated from Schopenhauer's hypostatization of the real as the product of an irrational will. Understood in this way, his practical philosophy contains valuable insights regarding how to reason about the relationship between the intelligible and practical maxims, though it fails in its account of the content of the intelligible.

Schopenhauer's concept of the intelligible inverts the notion, taken for granted, as Horkheimer had noted in "Theism and Atheism," by thinkers as diverse as modern philosophical theologians and their materialist detractors, that what is intuited as the most permanent or real is thereby also the good.

Only good could result from being at one with the most real, the best, the most powerful. ...

This is the philosophic conviction and at the same time the function of philosophy with which Schopenhauer broke. The highest, the most real, the metaphysical being to which philosophers had directed their view, away from the changing world of existing objects, is not at the same time the good. Degrees of reality are not degrees of perfection. Looking at the positively infinite, at the unconditional does not teach man how he should act; it is impossible to refer to the authority of being when one wishes a guide toward a decent course of action.⁸³

Schopenhauer thus severs any intrinsic link between the “real” and the “good”: the latter may not be understood as an intuitively evident characteristic of the former, and the former cannot thereby serve as a self-evident basis for practical maxims. In severing the link, Horkheimer specifies, Schopenhauer breaks decisively not simply with the content of past conceptualizations of the intelligible but also with the “function of philosophy” in its attempt to reason from the intelligible as a self-evident ground to practical maxims regarding the good.

Instead of presuming that the function of philosophy is to justify practical maxims in this way, Horkheimer continues, Schopenhauer’s reflections aim to uncover embodied instinctual and biological drives, which he takes to be the actual reasons behind practical activity that are often obscured by such reasoning. The “real,” for Schopenhauer, is thus presented as “the insatiable desire for well being and enjoyment, a desire which wells up every time it has been satisfied, and not the reasons the intellect finds for such strivings.”⁸⁴

Yet, in a strikingly counterintuitive move, Schopenhauer claims in his work of moral philosophy, *On the Basis of Morality*, that this does not mean that all practical action may be reduced to the *libido dominandi*. Despite his presentation of the will as rapacious, he asserts in reflecting on the formulation of practical maxims that, for certain subjects at least,

⁸³ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer Today,” 73.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

compassion may indeed become a possible way that the affective strivings of the will can be mediated. As Horkheimer notes, compassion for Schopenhauer is thus the “foundation of the good” and “the source of insight which is more profound than knowledge.”⁸⁵

A second element of Schopenhauer’s way of reasoning regarding practical maxims is thus revealed. For Schopenhauer, while the good may not be analytically inferred from the immediate experience of “nature” or “being,” it may be glimpsed in the contingent and ephemeral experience of compassion for another, “For Schopenhauer the good is far more the ephemeral, thought, and appearance, than that which keeps reproducing itself.”⁸⁶ The good life requires a sublation of instinct and desire in the form of compassion, yet this sublation is by no means assured as self-evident on the basis of a cognitive examination of reality in-itself. Compassion arises as one contingent possible mediation of experience among others, and appeals for a compassionate response to suffering may thus stand in significant tension with what seems self-evident to the subject in an antagonistic society.

Horkheimer’s critique of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the will is, of course, not incompatible with an appreciation of his practical philosophy. For the latter simply requires the acknowledgment that intelligible structure may not be read off the face of sensory experience, a premise Horkheimer readily grants. As is evident from the aforementioned passage in *Schopenhauers Denken*, however, Horkheimer wishes not merely to affirm Schopenhauer’s severing of the link, but also his hunch that “each person is one with the weakest being” as, in all actuality, “the deepest basis for morality.” By this, he suggests that Schopenhauer displays the most fundamental kind of reason humans can offer for practical action, thus drawing a qualitative distinction with an unnamed foil. What other kinds of

⁸⁵ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer the Bourgeois,” 188.

⁸⁶ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer Today,” 74.

bases might he have in mind? Horkheimer repeatedly appeals to Schopenhauer's account of universal solidarity in both his early and late work, and a careful examination of the parallels between such references and this later passage both confirm his interest in drawing a qualitative distinction, as well as illustrating the other kind of ground he envisions as a foil.

As we have noted, from his earliest writings, Horkheimer favors the idea that affective inclinations are the most basic (though certainly not the only) reasons agents may offer for the pursuit of practical maxims. For instance, in "Materialism and Metaphysics" (1933) he notes,

This materialist view has the negative significance that it rejects a metaphysically grounded morality. But in addition it has always meant to materialists that man's striving for happiness is to be recognized as a natural fact requiring no justification. The extent to which a naïve, economically oriented psychology can interpret this striving as a desire for satisfaction of gross material needs has been expounded in detail in the works of Erich Fromm. The structure of needs in various forms of society, in particular social groups, and in individuals is changeable and can be explained only in relation to a specific time and a concrete situation. ...

... Materialism refuses, however, to distinguish between happiness and pleasure, because the satisfaction of desire, unlike "higher" motives, requires no reasons, excuses, or justifications. Justifications may indeed be quite appropriate in a particular society for particular actions, but only to a particular authority and not because of some unconditional order of things.⁸⁷

As this passage illustrates, claiming that affective inclinations are the most basic or "natural" reasons one may appeal to in warranting practical maxims does not imply, for the early Horkheimer, that the content of such inclinations is either *self-evident* to all agents because rooted in "an unconditional order" (they are mediated historically and socially), nor that they are *self-sufficient* reasons for acting (there may be other justifications offered for action that are context-dependent). Rather, in the passage Horkheimer wishes to assert that such

⁸⁷ Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics" (1933), in *Critical Theory*, 44-45.

affective states form properly *basic* reasons for acting, and he contrasts this with the idea that one must appeal to a more fundamental intelligible basis to justify action.

In the same year Horkheimer pens this passage, it is not coincidental that he openly praises Schopenhauer's account of compassion as rooted in a universal solidarity between finite beings. "The solidarity of human beings," Horkheimer notes in "Materialism and Morality," "is part of the solidarity of life in general." Thus, "animals need human beings" and "it is the accomplishment of Schopenhauer's philosophy to have wholly illuminated the unity between us and them."⁸⁸ Coupling these reflections, we may note that Horkheimer considered Schopenhauer's understanding of solidarity to be a fit description of one of the most basic affective reasons that might be offered for moral maxims, yet he by no means concluded from this that such solidarity was either self-evident or that it should be set against other kinds of justifications, which appeal to the way particular historical practices mediate affective desire. We may note that Horkheimer's critique of Schopenhauer's metaphysics in his first Schopenhauer lecture is similarly coupled in a contemporaneous aphorism with an explicit affirmation that there is not a more basic kind of reason for moral maxims than affective solidarity. "Compassion," as he notes approvingly in an aphorism we have already examined, is "the foundation of the good."

Turning then, to Horkheimer's affirmation of Schopenhauer's "hunch" that identity with the suffering one is the most basic basis for moral action, we may conclude that he is not making a naïve statement regarding ontology. What he is, in fact, affirming is a way of reasoning about moral action which does not skip past the affective experience of the

⁸⁸ Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," (1933), in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 36.

subject on its way to invoke more basic reasons for acting. Compassionate solidarity, in this regard, is the “deepest basis for morality.”

Admittedly, this does not clarify every appeal Horkheimer makes to universal solidarity. Thus in an argument regarding Horkheimer’s implicit ontology based on a reading of the late interview “*Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen*,” Carlebach notes that while Horkheimer does not assume Schopenhauer’s particular account of the will, he does postulate a universal solidarity arising from the experience of finitude and embodiment (thus paralleling, according to Carlebach, Heidegger’s early existentialism). He thus concludes that, for Horkheimer, the moral significance of this solidarity may be grasped intuitively by all subjects on the basis of their embodied experience, quite apart from the mediation of historical traditions.⁸⁹ Horkheimer does indeed encapsulate his understanding of solidarity in *Die Sehnsucht* in a way that lends support to Carlebach’s claim, for he makes not a qualitative distinction between kinds of grounds for moral action but rather a claim regarding the extent of the solidarity which arises from finitude, “There is a solidarity ... that is not the naked solidarity of a certain class but which connects all people. I mean the solidarity which arises because people must suffer, because they die, because they are finite beings.”⁹⁰ Yet it is important to note that he revisits this appeal to solidarity at the end of the interview by situating it explicitly as an interpretation of experience offered by the Jewish tradition,

We come again to the reason why Judaism is so interesting for me. The identification not with the other, but with the others. I am interested in the fate of the others, I know

⁸⁹ Julius Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 240. Carlebach notes that “solidarity” is Horkheimer’s term for “natural man’s expression of and protest against his natural fate.”

⁹⁰ Horkheimer, “*Die Sehnsucht*,” 385-386. Horkheimer makes a parallel claim regarding the way solidarity arises from finitude and suffering in “Schopenhauer Today,” 81-82.

myself as an indispensable member of humanity in which I will live on. When I think about myself, I think about myself as a member of this humanity.⁹¹

While this awaits our study in the next chapter for detailed confirmation, it appears that Horkheimer wishes to preserve a conception of solidarity, not as an interpretation of the self-evident meaning of embodied experience but rather as a response to experience which is learned by participation in the practices of a community. Just as he acknowledges in his reflections on Schopenhauer that compassion is by no means the only or “natural” response an agent may have to the experience of finitude, so he recognizes that there is a relationship between compassionate solidarity and the way human commonality is understood in the Jewish tradition. As we shall see, Horkheimer maintains that the good as presented in the Jewish liturgy signifies one way in which affect and desire could in fact be mediated by those for whom compassion for the suffering is learned as a properly basic motive, though this may well be endangered if the contingent practices which foster this interpretation fall out of use.

The problem with modern conceptualizations of the intelligible, Horkheimer has argued, is that they are often presented as disclosures intuited by a passive subject instead of as a social practice of description learned in community. The justification of concept-use is thereby disconnected from the self-conscious judgment of subjects regarding the fittedness between such concepts and their continuing experience. Compounding this, they are understood as simply subsumptive and not reflective of the experience of subjects. This is why those who insist on “the permanence of concepts turn every essential trait and intellectual manifestation into a genus with such wide meshes that it retains its validity

⁹¹ Ibid., 401.

against all phenomena...which fall under it.”⁹² Such concepts remain unaffected in the face of the genuinely new or disruptive experience. The question Horkheimer wishes to raise in his late work is thus whether the relation of theological concepts to experience can be understood in a manner that is both sensitive to the way concept-use relates to the subject’s continuing experience and is open to the possibility of reformulation on the basis of qualitatively unique experiences. Horkheimer believes such an account of the retrieval and preservation of intelligible concepts is possible, and he argues how in a series of late reflections on liturgical reasoning in the Jewish tradition.

⁹² Horkheimer, “Concept of Man,” 14. For a discussion of the broader context from which this quote is drawn, note Chapter 4, section 2.2.2.

Chapter 6

Horkheimer's Liturgical Turn: Liturgical reasoning and the pursuit of the modern project

Horkheimer's mature theorizing addresses the fact that accounts of the intelligible are no longer taken up by moderns as self-evident disclosures of the structure of reality, yet neither are subjects able to leave intelligible concepts behind. The attempts to revive pre-critical explanations of the intelligible or to negate the meaningfulness of such concepts altogether are related responses to this phenomena. Both hold in common the idea that such concepts are a product of reason or the imagination. Horkheimer contests this shared premise by reasoning that such concepts are in actuality social practices of description learned by subjects inhabiting a historical tradition. It follows that they may be preserved, transformed, or fall out of use altogether, depending on how their continuing use relates to the self-understanding and projects of subjects in a form of life. He then reasons that the continued use of intelligible concepts is possible and can in fact be justified for modern subjects, if such concepts are self-consciously taken up by subjects as justified on the basis of their experience. This leaves a final detail unaddressed, however: what sort of practice is required to preserve intelligible concepts in a form suitable to this modern understanding of justification, and do any existing models of the practice exist?

It is worth prefacing Horkheimer's attempt to answer this question by recalling that positivism and metaphysical revivals are not understood by him simply as introspective practices for individuals. Rather, they are changes in learned practices of reasoning, which arise in reaction to shifts in the political economy and family-life characterizing the social whole. When Horkheimer thus turns in his late work to present an alternative to these social habits of reflection, he suggests an already existing, if peripheral, social practice which

shapes the reasoning patterns of subjects in contradistinction to such patterns of socialization, the practice of the liturgy.

In the liturgy of Jewish communities, notes Horkheimer, intelligible concepts are related by a social practice of reflection to their genesis in the shared experience of members of the community. Liturgical traditions publicly reflect back to their participants how the intelligible categories they employ reflect their shared historical remembrance and hopeful anticipation of the future. Therefore, the liturgy not only provides subjects with categories for interpreting the present, it facilitates the self-conscious reflection of subjects on the relationship between such categories and their own experience. The claim Horkheimer wishes to make is thus that participation in the liturgy enables a subject to identify itself with the contemporary use of the historical categories of a tradition on the basis of a self-conscious judgment regarding its own experience.

In considering Horkheimer's claim, I begin broadly by noting the way he relates the content of theological concepts to the experience of subjects in religious communities. I then examine his description of the relationship existing between concept-use and the experiences of remembrance and anticipation as this is embodied in the particular liturgical practices of the Jewish community (1). I then examine his portrayal of the relationship between historical categories and contemporary experience by noting his description of how the disruptive experience of exile forces the Jewish community to reflectively reconstruct its understanding of the intelligible (2.1.). I develop his account of what is entailed about the truth of intelligible concepts once the necessity of their reflective reconstruction is granted, by examining his understanding of the relationship between apophatic theology and the Jewish liturgy (2.2). I then conclude by noting the implications Horkheimer's account of

liturgical reasoning for the goal of his theorizing, that the modern subject might be enabled to inhabit its tradition reflexively in a self-satisfied way (3).

This chapter thus concludes the line of reasoning I have pursued in the three parts of this work. Horkheimer's late turn to theology, far from signaling a radical departure from either his materialist understanding of inquiry (in favor of philosophy), or a regression to pre-critical metaphysics (as an alternative to a pessimistic philosophy of history), is a therapeutic effort to address a form of alienation characterizing late modern life. It presents an account of how historical concepts of the intelligible may be preserved in a form suited to the self-understanding of modern subjects, as well as an already existing practice which models such preservation.

1. Horkheimer's description of liturgical practices.

In his late work, Horkheimer treats theological concepts as the consequence of the shared experiences of particular communities. For instance, in examining the role of mimesis in shaping the neophyte of a religious community, he notes that the propositional content of the teachings that shape subjects are inextricable from the particular historical life they share in community. On the one hand, the propositions learned are not the only or even the primary purveyor of the content conveyed to the neophyte,

The specific character of an ethnic or religious group does not depend solely on the conscious principles or the rules for life and conduct which the group may accept or reject. Along with all the doctrines proper to the Catholic or Protestant as well as to the Jewish religion, certain patterns of thought, associations, inclinations, and repugnances have developed, and these extend to non-religious matters; the same holds analogously for groups whose cohesion depends on something other than a religious faith. Think, for example, of the German dialectic groups: Rhinelanders, Schwabians, or Saxons. What distinguishes such groups ... is not simply the dialect, but all that goes with the speech: the concrete thought-forms, the gestures, the emotional reactions which have been developed along with the language in the course of history, the ways in which people question and invite, sorrow and rejoice. The child does not enter into all this as

a natural inheritance (as a mistaken theory would have it); rather in his earliest years he sees all this exemplified in mother and father and makes it his own.¹

One cannot limit what is learned cognitively in a religious community merely to the propositions communicated, the texts read, or the doctrines taught. For the form and content of propositions are two aspects of a singular practice which both constitute its meaning: in learning a language, one internalizes not merely vocabulary and grammar, but gesture, tone, mood, and patterns of association. Beckonings of invitation and hospitality, affective tone and facial expression, and the concrete physical links to place and time are all supposed by and condition the distinctive content of thought even as they do dialects. Affect and discursion, historical particularity and the universality of the spoken proposition cannot be so easily disentangled, particularly for the neophyte who stumbles at learned practices it has not yet come to take for granted.

Yet if explicit content is related to non-discursive habits that are internalized mimetically, so that meaning is never “pure” of such historical traces of particularity, it is equally the case that the content of propositions and doctrinal development are significant in the life of the subject. While Horkheimer thus begins his thought in another reflection in the same manner as the passage above, “The substantive moment in a spiritual whole is abstract. Taken by itself, the doctrine of a religion tells us little about it. Torquemada and Victor Hugo professed the identical faith which was yet something else, its own contradiction,”² he concludes in a distinctive way,

It is no less untrue to deny that content has significance in the meaning of an intellectual structure. The child that does not experience the happiness of having its mother’s

¹ Horkheimer, “The German Jews” (1961), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason: Lectures and Essays since the End of World War II*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et. al. (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 106.

² Horkheimer, “Spirit” (1959-1960), in *Dawn and Decline*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 196.

words and gestures impart to it a teaching for which heaven is not merely a space for rockets but a promise of salvation will get to know new friends and substitutes only in atrophied embodiments.³

If the propositional aspect of a religious practice cannot be divorced from the particularities of gesture, tone, mood, and association, it is equally the case that such non-discursive relations are shaped by content. There is no possible description of the unconditioned that is a product of “pure” reason or unmediated intuition, for affect and cognition are always related in thought.

As Horkheimer turns to describe the Jewish liturgy in particular, he is thus careful to relate its content to the social and historical life of a people. He notes that he learned to hope for an immanent historical salvation from how his mother faced harrowing tragedy. After quoting Psalm 91, he notes,

The first verse is engraved on the grave of my parents: “Who lives in the shelter of the Most High is in the safety of the shadow of the Almighty.” My mother loved that Psalm; I am not able even today to separate it from my remembrance of the gleam in her eyes whenever she spoke it. It was the expression of her certainty of a divine homeland in the face of the misery and the horror of reality. “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust,” states the second verse. Such confidence prevailed throughout her life in spite of a full consciousness of the disaster on the European horizon.

... Jewish thinking, as it is my tradition, neither confronted the accidental with an existing fear, nor luck and misfortune in this life with a future in the world to come. Longing for safety in the midst of daily dangers, in the presence of shame and ruin and chaos, is the thought of an immanent God. “You do not need to be afraid of the terror of the night, or of the arrow that flies by day, or of the plague that moves in the darkness, of the epidemic that devastates at Noon. Because your confidence is in the Lord, the Highest One you have made your refuge.”⁴

³ Ibid., 197.

⁴ Horkheimer, “Psalm 91” (1968), trans. Michael Ott, in *Marx, Critical Theory, and Religion*, ed. Warren S. Goldstein (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 116; trans. modified: “*Psalm 91*,” in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen, 1949-1973*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, vol. 7 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Tauschenbush, 1985), 208.

This recollection is instructive: the longing learned from his mother is not expressed as an intuited experience of the ground of being. It cannot be divorced from the sensuous experience of particular conditions, her remembrance of suffering and her hope for redemption. It is not an attempt to express the meaning or significance this suffering will have when it is transfigured against an eternal horizon. Rather, it is an expression of a historical hope for an immanent in-breaking, a divine intervention that will overturn the present experience of injustice that threatens the peace of Israel.

The intelligible longed for by his mother in the midst of her experience of tragedy, her vision of in-breaking immanent justice, notes Horkheimer, is not simply a natural response to tragedy. It is mediated by categories that are learned liturgically by the Jewish people in practices of remembrance and anticipation. On the one hand, longing takes the form of remembrance. The daily observance of torah unites the individual with past generations of eternal Israel.⁵ This continuity is also recalled in the recitation of the history of the people, as both the faithfulness of YHWH in redeeming Israel from slavery as well as the agonies of those who have died in exile is recounted. Reflecting upon the Jewish martyr, Horkheimer thus notes that she faced death rather than conversion in the anticipation that her suffering obedience would be remembered by the people as a faithful witness to the immanent arrival of the day of the Lord, “The Jewish lawbreaker of the late Middle Ages, who refused to buy an easier death or even his freedom by conversion, was faithful to something powerless.

⁵ I borrow the phrase “eternal Israel” from Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 52, “I ... take exception to a teaching that pertains to me personally, but not to my family and my village: to eternal Israel as we here and now embody it.”

The concept of God and people merged with the desire to be remembered by the people. The Jew knew of no other reward.”⁶

On the other hand, in the liturgy a future day of safety and justice is anticipated, and in the observance of torah the coming age is reflected in the present life of the people, so that the eschatological vision of the prophets is, in some sense, embodied now. Thus, obedience to the torah not only relates the Jew to historical “eternal Israel,” such observance enables her to proleptically participate in the coming day of the Lord as a foretaste of justice and mercy before the nations.

Through millennia of persecution, the Jews held together for the sake of justice. Their rituals, marriage and circumcision, dietary laws and holy days were moments of cohesion, of continuity. Jewry was not a powerful state but the hope for justice at the end of the world. They were a people and its opposite, a rebuke to all peoples.⁷

Remembrance and anticipation as these are embodied in the liturgical practices of Jewish communities may thus be understood as dual expressions of the longing for the eschatological day of YHWH, both of which provide a continuing motive for obedience to torah.

Horkheimer thus draws the themes of remembrance and proleptic anticipation together in relation to this obedience,

By conforming to the *torah*, life is provided to the individual, who spends his days, months, and years in obedience to the law. The individual thereby becomes so united with the others in spite of differences, that after his own death he continues to exist through their practice of tradition, the love of family and of the faithful ancestry in the expectation that it will once become good in the world. To bear witness to and stand

⁶ Horkheimer, “German Jews,” 114. Later Horkheimer thus notes, “The idea of a life after death means first of all not the hereafter but the bond with the nation, which has its prehistory in the Bible, and which has crassly been distorted by modern nationalism” (118).

⁷ Horkheimer, “The State of Israel” (1961-1962), in *Dawn and Decline*. 206. Cf. “German Jews,” 114, Jews remained “faithful to a law after the disappearance of the state that might have enforced the law, solely because of the hope in store for the just men of all nations.”

up for this is the meaning of belonging to the chosen people, which determines the conviction of the martyrs.⁸

This raises the question of how these elements of the liturgy relate to the judgment of the participant in the liturgy.

One may distinguish two ways, corresponding to remembrance and anticipation, that liturgical rehearsal relates to the contemporary experience of the people. In the form of memory, subjects re-experience past events which have shaped the understanding of their community regarding the meaning and purpose of its existence. Conversely, through envisioning the coming of the day of the Lord in worship, and then participating proleptically in this day by observing torah, subjects have an experience of the coming consummation of the future in the present moment. In both ways, the individual is challenged to understand anew its contemporary life as this is related to the categories of a community whose self-understanding it has come to take as its own.

Yet the interpretive relationship moves in both directions. The experience of the genuinely novel also calls for reflection upon the significance and continued use of such historical categories. Thus, as they are self-consciously related to the continuing experience of a people, historical concepts may, indeed, fail to satisfy subjects. As the practices and problems of historical agents develop and new constellations of experience are encountered, the challenge of the theologian is thus both to preserve the shared remembrance and anticipation of the people and to rearticulate this in a conceptual form adequate to the genuinely novel experiences faced by members of the community. While, as Horkheimer avers in a late interview, “Theological ideas are formulated today in terminology which no longer expresses what was meant originally and corresponds rather to relationships of an

⁸ Horkheimer, “Psalm 91,” 118, his emphasis.

earlier period” (recalling, it is worth noting, his critique of the anachronistic reassertion of Thomistic categories in *Eclipse of Reason*), he continues by emphasizing that this is not a necessary outcome, because “one may be able to express meaning in a new and nevertheless identical way.”⁹

In a late lecture addressed to Christian theologians, Horkheimer thus contrasts his understanding of the relationship between theological concepts and historical experience not merely with attempts to discern a universal common depth underlying the language of faith communities, but also with accounts that rely on the immediate relevance of concepts formulated in past historical periods for modern life, as if the usefulness of past concepts may be taken for granted and is not itself revealed and tested in each particular historical moment,

The liberal outlook which inclines to symbolic interpretation as a way of rescuing the idea of eternal truth ... is opposed by the conservative outlook which clings to the old and traditional in the most literal fashion. To concessions to enlightened views and compromise with rational thought the conservative opposes the piety that repeats verbatim the text of the Bible and traditional ideas. ... Such men, in refusing to be budged, forget that the meaning behind spiritual attitudes can survive only if it can find a new expression which is adequate to changing historical reality. Fidelity to the old is not proved by repeating it but by giving it new expression in word and deed at each historical juncture. If it is to continue to have its original meaning, the traditional must ever anew take a form that is geared to the age and appropriate to it while also contradicting it. Fidelity that does not take the changing world into account is not fidelity at all.¹⁰

While this contrast remains overly vague and is merely a programmatic sketch of sorts, the central point Horkheimer wishes to make is clear: both “liberal” and “conservative” approaches to theological concepts have in common an attempt to understand such concepts apart from their history of use. In contrast to the symbolism of the former,

⁹ Horkheimer, “*Die Funktion der Theologie in der Gesellschaft*” (1969) in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen, 1949-1973*, vol. 7 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Tauschenbush, 1985), 315.

¹⁰ Horkheimer, “Threats to Freedom” (1965), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, in 155-156.

faithful renderings of theological categories must have a genetic relationship to the memory and anticipation of those inhabiting the liturgical tradition, so that the meaning of the concept in relation to the historical experience of the people displayed in the liturgy may be preserved. Yet contrary to the anachronistic reassertion exemplified by the latter, fidelity to this historical experience may not simply be equated with past concept use; rather, the adequacy of past historical expressions of a tradition must be reexamined and articulated anew in relation to the developing experience of subjects. If such concepts are taken as a-historical, the contingent threads that connect their appropriation and use to the experience of a people are equally as threatened as they might have been by more liberal forms of symbolism. Articulating what it means to preserve remembrance and anticipation in the face of present suffering, and explaining what longing for the day of the Lord entails for subjects living in this *hic et nunc*, this remains the continual task.

Admittedly, as I have already noted, the above reflections remain overly abstract. In reflections on Psalm 91, Horkheimer demonstrates the proper preservation of historical categories more concretely by relating the vision of the coming of YHWH presented in the Psalm to both the experience of past generations of “eternal Israel” in exile, as well as to the contemporary experience of the Holocaust. While intelligible categories are accounts of the meaning and direction of history, they may not, notes Horkheimer, be abstracted from or set over against the particular historical experience of the subject. Rather, the meaning of an intelligible concept is constituted and its continuing use justified in relation to this developing historical experience. Horkheimer’s reflections thus endeavor to demonstrate how past intelligible ends may be reflectively related to qualitatively new experiences by the subjects who employ them. Without denying the possibility that compelling analogies

between the past and present uses of historical concepts may arise, he demonstrates that such analogies and the consequent continued use of a concept must be the product of self-conscious reflection by subjects. This task of self-reflection, notes Horkheimer, may not be circumvented by the mere reassertion of past conceptual forms as if their continuing significance were self-evident or by claims that equate particular historical concepts with the unconditioned itself. Let us turn to examine these claims.

2. Liturgy and the preservation of intelligible concepts

2.1. Exile

In the face of experiences like exile, Horkheimer notes, the Jewish liturgy does not simply invest the suffering of subjects with meaning in relation to an already taken for granted account of the whole. That is, the liturgy does not simply serve as a practice of *subsumption* which levels the challenge to accepted categories by placing the disruptive experiences of suffering in relation to already given explanations. It also enables a practice of *reflective* reasoning: the liturgy allows subjects to juxtapose received conceptualizations of the whole alongside the alienation resulting from their own experience. Indeed, the Psalms themselves are a record of the self-conscious struggle of a people with this juxtaposition. Intelligible concepts arising in the liturgy do not merely interpret but may themselves be interpreted in response to the suffering of the subject.

As Horkheimer attempts to relate the remembrance and anticipation embodied in his liturgical tradition to the experience of exile, he begins by noting that there are two ways members of the tradition may relate such intelligible concepts to suffering. Which way should be chosen, or how a subject should go about “inhabiting” the tradition of Judaism and understanding its presentation of such ends, is not intuitively self-evident in the face of

persecution and suffering but rather involves self-conscious reflection, which the subject conducts on the basis of its historical experience. The crucial point which Horkheimer's reflections illustrate is that the give-and-take of this process, whereby subjects inhabiting a liturgy come to be at home and take as their own the intelligible concepts expressed in their tradition, does not begin from a place clear of the organizing influence of traditioned concepts, by assuming a posture of abstract negation. Yet neither does it assume the authority of such concepts as self-evident apart from the judgment of the individuals inhabiting the tradition. Rather, the liturgy exhibits the already existing relationship between intelligible concepts and the historical experience of subjects, inviting a subject to identify itself in a judgment regarding the social practices of the community, rather than living without such concepts altogether or accepting them as self-evident or natural immediacies.

At various points in their history, Horkheimer notes, Jews have understood exile as a judgment meted out in accord with the character of YHWH. Rather than abandon hope that YHWH will restore justice and save the righteous in history, they reason that the fate of those who die in exile is a reflection of divine justice and thus, in some sense, deserved.

The Jews, who sang the Psalms through the millennia, knew that all too often they themselves were counted as sacrifices to the swords of barbarians, to the torture chambers, to the funeral pile. However, rather than renounce the love, exuberance, and praise of God, who will finally rescue the just of all nations, they calculated their own dead, their own people, individual as well as collective, among those who had been punished justly.¹¹

This exemplifies one way of relating historical experience to the liturgical presentation of the intelligible. Reflection on the relationship between the category of justice and the experience of exile involves a subsumptive practice that equates all instances of suffering-in-

¹¹ Horkheimer, "Psalm 91," 117-118; trans. modified: "*Psalm 91*," 209-210.

exile as a reflection of divine equity. Horkheimer is, as one might expect, deeply dissatisfied with this. Thus he prefaces the preceding with an incredulous question, “The downfall of countless is counted as the ‘reward of the godless.’ ... Should the terror that happens in the world every day ... be called well-deserved punishment?”¹² The accusation of unrighteousness placed retrospectively upon ones who have died in exile causes an affective revulsion in Horkheimer that threatens to overwhelm the coherence of the tradition itself. Such liturgical reasoning, he concludes, stands in stark contrast “to common sense, to the plausible.”¹³

If the content of the intelligible idea of justice is understood as self-evident or intuitive, then this subsumption of suffering will be the last word. However, Horkheimer notes, the Jewish liturgical tradition remains vital because an alternative way of relating experience to concepts of the intelligible develops. “Those who persevered [*die Unbeirrbarkeit*],” that is, the ones who faithfully continued practicing the liturgy in the face of persecution,

were relieved, it appears to me, by the fact that in Judaism the teaching of the individual soul did not develop the meaning that it has in Christianity. When it states in the Psalm, “you make the Highest your refuge. He has commanded his angel to protect you on all your ways,” this concerns the protection of all as well as the individual. The people, bound together through the practice of the divine commandments even though spread throughout the diaspora [*in der Zerstreuung*], were considered as a whole, not only in the present or in a past historical moment, but as one until the end of time.¹⁴

If the locus of divine justice were the individual, Horkheimer notes, present suffering would either be deserved retribution (which he denies), or perhaps an injustice that may only be rectified in eternity, which, according to Horkheimer, relies upon a developed conception of

¹² Ibid., 117; trans. modified: “*Psalm 91*,” 209.

¹³ Horkheimer, “*Psalm 91*,” 209. Ott’s translation of the relevant sentence (“*Psalm 91*,” 117) requires significant modification. Here is my translation of the relevant context: “Other than resignation to a terrifying existence, to the irrationality of reality ... I know only powerlessness as an explanation for this contradiction to common sense, to the plausible.”

¹⁴ Horkheimer, “*Psalm 91*,” 118; trans. modified: “*Psalm 91*,” 210.

the eternity of the individual soul, and is thus a uniquely Christian theodicy.¹⁵ However, as the Jewish tradition develops, the locus of in-breaking justice is not understood to be the individual but eternal Israel. Thus neither the ascription of an individual guilt which might justify temporal persecution as punishment, nor claims that the unjust suffering of the individual will be rectified in eternity, are acceptable as resolutions of the experience of exile. Rather, Horkheimer notes, Psalm 91 expresses the hope of a people, who are “bound together through the practice of the divine commandments,” which unify them across space and time as a foretaste and anticipation of the coming day of the Lord. Thus, for instance, the hope of the martyr who dies in exile is not for personal life after death. Rather, it is that her memory will be taken up into the life of her people through remembrance, so that one day, as a part of eternal Israel, she will be vindicated at the coming of the day of YHWH, “[The Jewish martyr] did not ... believe in something attainable for himself personally, rather he was of the conviction that he would live on in his people. The Jewish martyrs sacrificed their life, not for their own salvation, but for the salvation of their people.”¹⁶

Thus union with the people opens itself outward into a hope for reunion with the just of every nation,

In Judaism, the religion I myself profess, such love was far less connected than in Christianity with the idea of the individual soul and a life after death. Expectation centered rather on the Messiah who would appear on earth some day and lead the just men of every nation to Zion. This belief was constantly reinvigorated by the experience of earthly injustice; it determined both the orthodox Jew’s scrupulous observance of all rites and the liberal Jew’s adherence to his religion. The expectation that against all probabilities and despite the previous course of history paradise would some day come,

¹⁵ Cf. Horkheimer’s portrayal of Aquinas’ eschatology in “The Soul,” (1967), *Critique of Instrumental Reasoning*, 52-54. For his critique of this theodicy, note “*Schopenhauers Denken im Verhältnis zu Wissenschaft und Religion*” (1971), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 242; “Religion and Philosophy,” trans. by Eduardo Mendieta, in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 244; “What is Religion?” (1957-1958), in *Dawn and Decline*, 163; “*Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen*” (1970), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 398.

¹⁶ Horkheimer, “*Die Sehnsucht*,” 389-390.

as the Torah and the prophets had promised, was the source of solidarity among Jews and between Jews and outsiders who were upright men.¹⁷

The particular rites and commandments making up the observance of torah, far from merely distinguishing the diasporic Jew from the nations, formed her in the hope of this coming universal justice, thus shaping her sense of solidarity with others awaiting justice.

A conception of a future eschatological consummation thus structures the self-understanding of the Jewish people, and this understanding is constituted in relation to the historical experience of exile. The result of the exile, the reality that “injustice has ... become a mode of experience” for the Jewish people, has shaped the way subjects have come to relate the intelligible to their experience; it has formed a strong aversion within the tradition to any attempt to subsume the meaning of suffering as individual judgment. Rather than subsuming the experience of suffering as an instance of justice, “Suffering and hope have become inseparable.”¹⁸ Those who have suffered in exile live on in the contingent historical memory of the people as faithful witnesses to the coming day of the Lord, whose witness will one day be vindicated. Whereas, according to Horkheimer, Christian theology presents the temporal experience of suffering as instrumental to redemption, Jewish theology expresses a reticence to understand suffering itself as necessary (or less tragic) when placed against an intelligible background.

In an illuminating contrast, Horkheimer thus concludes, after noting that “Suffering and hope have become inseparable,” that

At one point in their history the European people became aware of this connection and, in their confession of the martyred redeemer, introduced into the godhead itself the torments which Jews were willing to suffer for the sake of that ultimate future they could not abandon. ... Jews, however, are not ascetical people as the first Christians

¹⁷ Horkheimer, “Threats to Freedom,” 149-150.

¹⁸ Horkheimer, “The Arrest of Eichmann” (1960), in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 122.

were; they have never glorified or worshipped or sought or praised suffering but only experienced it. Yet more than for other peoples suffering is inextricably intertwined with their memory of the dead. According to the Jewish law men cannot become saints through suffering, as in Christianity; suffering simply colors remembrance of the dead with an infinite tenderness that does not depend on the consoling thought of eternal life.¹⁹

Suffering is thus not justified either as an instance of divine justice or as necessary for individual redemption, but is a faithful witness that is preserved in the memory of the people that will be vindicated by the coming day of the Lord.

Horkheimer illustrates how the suffering of the individual in exile may be understood, not as an instance to be subsumed by the concept of the intelligible presented in the liturgy, but as a moment which allows the reflective reconstruction of the concept on the basis of experience. Subjects participating in the Jewish tradition self-consciously reconceive and reorder existing patterns of concept-use on the basis of the experience of exile in order to allow the tragedy of suffering and the dignity of the dead to be preserved. It is evident therefore that Horkheimer is not concerned with the abstract negation or affirmation of concepts of the intelligible, construed as reflections of a realm existing apart from historical experience. Rather, he wishes to note how intelligible concepts and historical experience are interdependent, insofar as the former both arises from as well as interprets historical experience. This emphasis on the mutual dependency of intelligible claims and contingent experience reflects a repair of modern treatments of the intelligible which abstract its conceptualization from the sensuous experience of historical communities, and consequently portray the function of such conceptualizations as simply subsumptive.

¹⁹ Ibid., 122-123.

2.2. Apophatic theology

If intelligible concepts are always related in the liturgy to the concrete historical experience and eschatological anticipation of a people, such that they are open to reconstruction on the basis of disruptive experiences through a process of reflective reasoning, is it possible to understand the content of such concepts in a way that both recognizes the truth of existing statements regarding the intelligible yet also does not foreclose the attempt to reconstruct such conceptualizations in the face of qualitatively unique experiences?

In his mature work, Horkheimer presents apophatic theology as a way of understanding how these claims, regarding both the *truth content* of existing concepts as well as the *dependency* of such concept on the continuing experience of subjects, may be upheld. Horkheimer's reflections on apophatic theology are sometimes interpreted as a response to critical theory's search for a transcendent standpoint.²⁰ But in discussing apophatic theology, Horkheimer does not present the Absolute as the negation of all merely finite claims. Rather, he uses it to illustrate how one may claim that judgments regarding the intelligible are "true" while at the same time holding that such concepts develop historically. In other words, given his account of the reconstruction of intelligible concepts in relation to historical experience, he wishes to account for how the historical contingency of such concepts is congruent with their continuing truth for members in a community of faith.

We have already noted Horkheimer's circuitous attempt to address this question in the interview "*Die Funktion der Theologie*," "While theology ... cannot describe and determine 'the Intelligible,' it is at least able to say how what science does not pay attention to should

²⁰ For instance, Christopher Craig Brittain, "Social Theory and the Premise of all Criticism: Max Horkheimer on Religion," *Critical Sociology* 31, no. 1-2 (January 2005): 166-167.

be observed.”²¹ This is ambiguous: how is it possible to suggest what science does not pay attention to without “describing” and “determining” it? In what sense may one describe and determine it without thereby speaking falsely? Apophatic theology provides a way of addressing this ambiguity for Horkheimer.

Horkheimer begins his analysis by outlining the affinity of apophatic theology with Kant’s critique of metaphysical ideas.²² When one speaks of God through the negation of creaturely limitation or imperfection, he notes, the result is always a speculative act of the imagination which surpasses what a subject may possibly comprehend on the basis of the ordering of sense-intuitions by its faculty of understanding. The reason for this is that the intelligible object is not a condition amidst others that might be experienced. Or as Horkheimer puts it, “the ... truth which is supposed to come to expression in religion cannot enter into the human language or conceptual world.”²³ To even speak regarding the intelligible indirectly, *via* negation, supposes an analogy between creation and Creator which itself is not given in experience, however much it may be supposed by the interpretive habits of a religious community. Consequently, the subject’s ordering of such discrete sensations and its “knowledge of the relations between appearances in this world” is “not the final explanation of reality, not an absolute.”²⁴ Yet this does not mean, notes Horkheimer, that all such talk is empty, only that, “God ... becomes an object [*Gegenstand*]

²¹ Horkheimer, *Die Funktion der Theologie*, 315.

²² Horkheimer thus prefaces his thoughts on apophatic theology in “Observations on the Liberalization of Religion” (1971), trans. by Eduardo Mendieta, in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, 255; trans. modified: “*Bemerkungen Zur Liberalisierung der Religion*,” in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 238, with a central premise of transcendental idealism, “Our subjective organization is the reason why the world is encountered as objective reality; it is not a pure “in-itself” but rather a function [of our faculty of understanding].”

²³ Ibid., 255; trans. modified: “*Bemerkungen Zur Liberalisierung*,” 238.

²⁴ Ibid.; trans. modified: “*Bemerkungen Zur Liberalisierung*,” 238.

of human longing and veneration; he ceases to be an object [*Objekt*] of knowledge and possession.”²⁵

What Horkheimer understands as the “truth” of intelligible concepts hinges on this contrast. The intelligible, if presented as an *Objekt*, could be comprehended on the basis of sense-experience. It may, of course, be the case that the subject’s understanding would organize various sense-intuitions in a mistaken way and thus misunderstands this *Objekt*. Nevertheless, the *Objekt* is, in principle, experienced. By contrast, the apophatic tradition understands the intelligible as a presentation of that which is, in an ultimate sense, *Gegenstand*, that which stands “over against” any created thing insofar as it is not a discrete object of possible experience and is thus qualitatively distinct from any *Objekt*.

Yet this does not make talk of the intelligible meaningless. Rather, this distinction allows self-conscious reflection upon the role of the historically situated subject in speaking of the intelligible. When Horkheimer concludes that “human thought is able to order the facts of sense-perception, not move beyond them, except as the longing arising from theology for that which is other than this world,”²⁶ he is not engaging in sentimentality, but rather recognizing that one may not postulate regarding that which is beyond sense-experience *except* in a particular mode. That mode is a form of longing which arises and is expressed in terms of the historical practices of a people. Or as Horkheimer puts it, “humans that have this same longing, this same basic conviction that something about existence is unjust ... have shared customs, ensuring that awareness about this, their longing, is understandable.”²⁷

²⁵ Ibid.; trans. modified: “*Bemerkungen Zur Liberalisierung*,” 238-239.

²⁶ Horkheimer, “*Schopenhauers Denken*,” 241.

²⁷ Horkheimer, “Observations on Liberalization,” 255; trans. modified: “*Bemerkungen Zur Liberalisierung*,” 239.

This “longing” for the Jew is not an individual *existential* state. Rather, expressions of worship regarding the intelligible are rooted in an analogy with the historical experiences of the community, presented to the subject vis-à-vis the particular practices of remembrance and anticipation rehearsed in the liturgy. But it is precisely because longing for the intelligible arises in relation to an account of redemptive history that concepts of the intelligible must remain open to historical development and revision on the basis of unfolding experiences in the life of a worshipping people.

Apophatic reasoning provides, Horkheimer notes, a model for understanding the relationship between intelligible concepts and historical experience. Such concepts are

- (1): rooted in historical experience,
- (2): a precondition for the pursuit of meaning in the present and
- (3): the proleptic embodiment of hoped for future states.

In each of these modes they express the convictions of a people regarding the truth of that people’s existence. Yet because such concepts are also dependent on history, they remain, at the same time, open to reflection and reformulation on the basis of the unfolding experience of the people. Thus Horkheimer presents apophatic reflection as a way that subjects may recognize both the truth and the historical contingency of the concepts which direct their practical action.

The Jewish prohibition against portraying God, or Kant’s against straying into the noumenal world both recognize the absolute whose determination is impossible. This also applies to Critical Theory when it states that evil, primarily in the social sphere, but also in individuals, can be identified, but that the good can not. The concept of the negative—be it that of the relative or of evil—contains the positive as its opposite. Practically speaking, the denunciation of an act as evil at least suggests the direction a better one would take. The insistence on the difference in the truth of the two judgments rests on many elements. One of the most important of these lies in the relation to history, to time generally. Evil largely refers to the present; the good has to prove itself as such. To take confirmation for granted exceeds the capacities of the

person making the judgment, represents the absolutization of a hypothesis—and this quite apart from the metaphysical impossibility which such absolutization involves. The critical analysis of society points to the prevailing injustice. The attempt to overcome it has repeatedly led to greater injustice. To torture a person to death is purely and simply an outrage: to save him if possible, a human duty. If one wishes to define the good as the attempt to abolish evil, it can be determined. And this is the teaching of Critical Theory. But the opposite—to define evil by the good—would be an impossibility, even in morality.²⁸

In response to the experience of suffering, subjects may name their experience of abhorrence. Such abhorrence indeed contains the beginning of a response, the felt obligation to alleviate the horror. Implicit in this response is, further, a set of related beliefs regarding the dignity and proper flourishing of the human, as well as regarding the conditions which would allow its realization, which serve as a basis for the judgment of the act as abhorrent (“the negative ... contains the positive as its opposite ... the denunciation of an act as evil at least suggests the direction a better one would take”). Yet a distinction may be drawn between the expression of abhorrence, an expression that is based upon discrete sense-experiences in the here and now, and the expression of an implicit vision of the world in which the particular conditions allowing suffering are overcome. Learning this latter vision in the context of some community is a precondition for having the experience of abhorrence in the first place. Yet this attendant thought of the intelligible meaning of the whole is not based in the sense-experience which elicits the judgment, though it is integral to the ability to *have* the experience in such a way that one can render a judgment about it. Rather than being anchored in the sensation, it speculates regarding that which is beyond it, the concrete realization of a better society. As such, it may be understood in itself as a kind of “postulate,” a description that places discrete experiences in relation to a speculative

²⁸ Horkheimer, “On Critical Theory” (1966-1969), *Dawn and Decline*, 236-237. Cf. Horkheimer, “A Weakness of Theology” (1961-1962), in *Dawn and Decline*, 219, “To the extent that something other than what is can be expressed, it appears in its true negation.”

whole, a whole which is itself dependent upon the historical experience and anticipation a subject has learned in community.

Horkheimer does not distinguish the two kinds of judgments by noting that the first relates to sense-experience whereas the second is meaningless. On the contrary, the first statement is a judgment which is by no means a “pure” description for it already calls forth a response which assumes a whole set of preconceptions regarding practical ends. Rather, he distinguishes the two kinds of judgment in an altogether different manner, by noting their “relation to history, to time generally.” Even if the first judgment is taken for granted as true, its implicit intelligible preconditions – notions of the realization of dignity, proper flourishing, etc. – remain open to reformulation on the basis of the continuing experience of the subject. This is not because such preconditions have nothing to do with experience, but because they are postulates which do not remain unaffected by different forms of historical experience. This is why elsewhere Horkheimer asserts that in the case of intelligible concepts, there can be no such thing as “truth without question marks [*Wahrheit ohne Fragezeichen*].”²⁹ Judgments regarding the intelligible are analogies drawn from experience which both enable experience yet overreach it, which shape and continue to be shaped by historical development in fluid relation to the memory and anticipation of the subject. The prohibition on naming the absolute thus recognizes the contingency and dependency of attempts preserved in the liturgy to portray intelligible ends, as well as of every striving to proleptically realize this future in the life of the people. It is a recognition of both the necessity of such concepts to contexts of inquiry, as well as their fallibility.

²⁹ Horkheimer, “*Über den Zweifel*” (1969), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 213.

Horkheimer's contrast between "longing" and "dogma" in his late writing should be understood in this context as an attempt to distinguish two ways of understanding the status of the intelligible concepts learned in the liturgy. In a late interview with *Der Spiegel* Horkheimer attempts to explain his notion of longing by noting what it is not: he does not intend, he notes, to set forth the concept of longing as a competitor to traditional religious categories, nor does he wish to understand such categories as symbolic representations of an underlying intuition of the intelligible.

HORKHEIMER: I would say that one should renovate [*erneuern*³⁰] theology. ...

SPIEGEL: So, a new religion?

HORKHEIMER: No, we cannot establish a new religion. The old confessions may continue to exist and be effective provided they admit that they put into words a longing and not dogma.

SPIEGEL: Do you mean the liberalization of religion, as it is progressing today?

HORKHEIMER: Hardly. The modern liberalization of religion leads, as far as I am concerned, to the end of religion.³¹

Elsewhere, in a more precise manner, Horkheimer lays out positively the contrast between "longing" and "dogma" as follows,

If the tradition, the religious categories, particularly the justice and goodness of God, are not mediated as dogma, as absolute truth, but as a longing for these things that allows for authentic grief [*die zu wahrer Trauer fähig sind*]³²—precisely because the teachings are unable to be proven and doubt in them remains—theological meaning is able to preserve at least its basis in an adequate form. ... To include doubt in religion is a moment in its salvation.

Horkheimer's references here two ways of taking "religious categories," one of which understands them as referencing a reality behind the empirical, an unconditioned

³⁰ *Erneuern* has a semantic range that is strikingly similar to *aufheben* ("sublation"): the latter includes "abolish," "preserve," and "transcend;" the former, "replace," "renovate," and "renew."

³¹ Horkheimer, "*Was wir 'Sinn' nennen, wird verschwinden*" (1970), in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 350-351.

³² Horkheimer, "*Über den Zweifel*," 222-223.

“absolute,” and another which offers such categories as objects of hope in recognition that they exceed sense-intuition and are thus endeavors to explain the significance of the whole by way of an analogy with experience. This latter understanding, he notes, neither circumscribes the expression of the intelligible nor treats such judgments as final. In basic continuity with his reflection on the way such concepts were reconstructed by the Jewish community in response to the experience of exile, he notes rather that they are not immune from doubt and must constantly be related to contingent experience, thus allowing “authentic grief” in the face of suffering.

In a comparison of the relationship between Judaism and Hegelian idealism, Horkheimer concludes in way that further clarifies this reflection,

In both cases [Judaism and Hegelian idealism], the issue is a truth which cannot be isolated and positively stated, but which is there nonetheless. This element of contradiction is inherent in the Jewish tradition as it is in dialectical philosophy where it becomes explicit as a moment in the process of thought as it strives toward the truth.³³

Judaism, like idealism, presumes that there is such a thing as “truth” which is not “beyond” history but bears an immanent relation to the development of historical conditions. Yet, for the former, the “truth” of the whole may only be portrayed *via* its absence in terms of concrete historical contexts, by way of mediated analogies to the very objects of experience from which it is supposedly distinguished as qualitatively distinct! The prohibition on naming the absolute recognizes the contingency and dependency of the attempts preserved in the liturgy to portray such ends, as well as of every striving to proleptically realize this future in the life of the people. It is a recognition of both the necessity of such concepts to contexts of inquiry, as well as their fallibility.

³³ Horkheimer, “German Jews,” 113.

The preservation of intelligible categories thus cannot depend on the certainty that the categories of human thought are beyond any doubt or alteration. Apophatic reflection self-consciously refuses the idea of the self-contained concept: human thought itself cannot be identified with the mind of God as a presentation of the unconditioned. However such concepts are not meaningless or baseless due to this situated dependency. For the remembrance of redemptive history that is rehearsed in the liturgy, the anticipation of the day to come which is experienced proleptically in obedience to *torah*, and the eschatological anticipation of the future day, provide a basis to members in the community of faith for accepting the intelligible categories which inform their own practical activity. Such categories, Horkheimer has argued, may be preserved in a self-conscious way as they are related to the liturgical practices of historical traditions.

3. Liturgical reasoning and the self-realization of the subject

Instead of disconnecting the intelligible from any notion of history or hypostasizing such “ends” as reflections of self-evident immediacies, Horkheimer presents liturgical reasoning as a way subjects may self-consciously reflect on the relation of intelligible ends to their own developing historical experience. This enables previously alienated subjects to identify themselves anew with traditional practices by understanding the meaning of such practices as justified in relation to historical experience. The Enlightenment goal of the self-realization of the subject may therefore be realized, Horkheimer argues, not as the abstract negation of traditions, but rather as a way of re-inhabiting traditions in a form adequate to this modern concern.

In an instructive late aphorism, Horkheimer compares his own approach to the preservation of concepts with Adorno’s negative dialectics,

The dialectic which leads to no positive result only seems to be a way out. It is true that it is the meaning of the determinate negation that a negated thought becomes the inhering moment in a differentiated, richer intellectual structure. But if such structure has no chance to prove that it is superior to reality, there is no certainty, indeed no likelihood whatever that it is more than the originally negated thought. Validation may be sociological or psychological, that more complex structure may increase the capacity for pleasure, provide a better overview, win the consent of individuals or entire groups, but in and of itself, it has no truth, however seductive it may sound. ... What remains is insight into the impotence of all that is spirit and is not content with mere power. That is the truth, and at this point, materialism and serious theology converge.³⁴

The practice of negative dialectics, Horkheimer notes, cannot itself break through the limits of discursivity. Its outcome, the richer, more differentiated thought it purports to offer subjects, must itself be subjected to concrete testing in the historical life of subjects. The dialectic is an act of thought that must be situated in relation to the practical experience of subjects. If the distance between the concept and the non-conceptual can only be experienced discursively as a limit, it is only in subjecting the adequacy of the concept to reflection on the basis of historical experience that the subject comes to realize the distance between the adequacy of the concept to which they have grown accustomed and their own sensuous experience.

This distance cannot itself be overcome by an act of thought. That which is merely “spirit,” the desire for that which is unrealized by present conditions and unsupported by present institutional practices, the eschatological horizon invoked in liturgical remembrance and anticipation, is “impotent,” for it is pursued as a receding horizon that is always glimpsed in a way that is provisional and subject to the continuing historical development of the tradition which subjects inhabit. Its “final” form cannot be realized by an act of thought. It is precisely in presenting a conception of the intelligible as ever just beyond the

³⁴ Horkheimer, “Against Philosophy” (1957-1958) in *Dawn and Decline*, 159-160. Cf. “Pessimismus Heute,” in *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen*, 232, “Pessimism unites historical- philosophical experiences with the inheritance of great theology.”

vanishing point of discursive conceptuality, Horkheimer notes, that materialism and theology agree in a form of reflection regarding the naming of the good that recognizes the dependency of every such concept on the continuing lived experience of subjects in a tradition.

Conclusion

Inquiry and Public Theology: Horkheimer Reconsidered

In the introduction, I noted that Horkheimer's mature work is often portrayed as travelling through diverse stages. His early theorizing, according to this portrayal, is marked by an interest in the way empirical inquiry relates to cognitive reflection and social critique. Yet he gradually comes to abandon this concern with empirical inquiry, concluding his career with a marked interest in theology.¹ This turn is explained by interpreters as a desire on Horkheimer's part to remedy the lack of a normative standpoint in his own critical theory. His appeal to theology, it is supposed, is an attempt by him to recover a viewpoint apart from compromised social practices, upon which the critique of such practices might proceed. The more pessimistic Horkheimer becomes, the more solace he seeks in the idea that there is a theocentric standpoint beyond the earthly veil of tears, characterized as the latter is by man's insatiable *libido domini*.

This turn is judged a failure by second-generation theorists because the standpoint to which it appeals is "metaphysical." What such critics mean by this criticism is that, for Horkheimer's standpoint to be true, it would require inferences that depart from what may be warranted by the sense experience of situated historical subjects. Agents cannot escape the contingencies of their own historical and social location to attain an unmediated god's eye view of the whole. But Horkheimer's late work, according to such interpreters, is marked by precisely such a view, and is thus characterized by "the metaphysics that not only

¹ For a review of this interpretation and an analysis of the central role of Helmut Dubiel's *Wissenschaftsorganisation und politische Erfahrung* in shaping the present scholarly consensus that I am contesting, note the Introduction. Here I summarize what I term stages (1) and (4) in this dominant theory of Horkheimer's development.

philosophers but even theologians themselves must today get along without.”² His mature reflections on theology, according to this heuristic, are no longer concerned with the study of actually existing empirical relations. They appeal, rather, to an illicit “intelligible” object, God, to underwrite the critique of empirical practices.

My research illustrates that this portrayal of Horkheimer’s turn to theology misunderstands two crucial elements in his mature work: how he understands religious concepts like “God” and the purpose of his appeal to such concepts in his reflections on the Jewish liturgy. I shall discuss each, before turning to the implications this research has for present discussions in critical theory on the relationship between religion and reason.

1. The concept of God

It is well-known that Horkheimer challenges the idea that religious concepts like “God” have no relation to possible sensory experience throughout his career.³ In noting the common *object* of Horkheimer’s critique in his early and later work, however, one may not minimize the way his own conception of religious concepts also change. In his early essays on religion, Horkheimer is content to argue that the rational content of such concepts resides in their expression of human longing and desire. He thus notes in “Thoughts on

² Jürgen Habermas, “To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning Without God Is a Futile Undertaking: Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer,” in *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, tr. Ciaran P. Cronin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1993), 134. For a detailed discussion of Habermas’ essay and a critical evaluation of his textual support for this claim, note Chapter 5.

³ We have noted that Horkheimer’s early and later essays alike take aim at “positivism,” by which he references ideas such as those expressed by A.J. Ayer in *Language, Truth, and Logic*,

I require of an empirical hypothesis, not indeed that it should be conclusively verifiable, but that some possible sense-experience should be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood. If a putative proposition fails to satisfy this principle, and is not a tautology, then I hold that it is metaphysical, and that, being metaphysical, it is neither true nor false but literally senseless.

Among “senseless” concepts, Ayer includes “that there is a non-empirical world of values, or that men have immortal souls, or that there is a transcendent God,” (“Language, Truth, and Logic,” in *Classics of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Louis P. Pojman [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 1226).

Religion” (1935), for instance, that the “productive kind of criticism of the status quo,” which at one time was expressed by religious belief, is today expressed by those who “struggle for a more rational form of societal life.” He terms this the “transition from religious longing to conscious social practice.”⁴ The experiential content of the religious concept is, for the early Horkheimer, a common human experience of dissatisfaction and desire arising from economic oppression, which may be freed from its mythical religious trappings in order to serve as an impetus for rational social action.

It may thus be said that Horkheimer both *attributes* real experiential content to religious concepts (in contrast, say, to positivists) and also attempts to *extricate* this content from its relationship to orthodox claims about God, humanity, sin, and salvation. Both of these moments, “attribution” and “extrication,” constitute the naturalist philosophy of religion characteristic of many Enlightenment critics of religion.⁵ Horkheimer self-consciously situates his own work in the Marxist stream of this critique.⁶

In his mature writings, however, Horkheimer’s view of the religious concept begins to develop in a manner that puts him at sharp odds with this earlier perspective. On the one hand, he continues to affirm that religious concepts give voice to meaningful human experiences and desires. However, he is no longer satisfied with the idea that this human experience can be understood without remainder, “objectively,” so to speak, if one abstracts

⁴ Horkheimer, “Thoughts on Religion,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et. al. (repr., 1972; New York: Continuum, 1999), 129.

⁵ Terry Eagleton cleverly summarizes precisely this demythologizing project of ‘old’ Enlightenment atheists in his response to the ‘new’ atheists in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 34, noting, “What [religious belief] has going for it, to be sure, may not be what those who hold the doctrine consider it to be; but there are many possibilities between this and pure garbage. It ought always to be possible to extract the rational kernel from the mystical shell.”

⁶ In “Thoughts on Religion,” Horkheimer thus repeats Marx’s own analysis of religion with little modification, “Dissatisfaction with earthly destiny is the strongest motive for acceptance of a transcendent being. If justice resides with God, then it is not to be found in the same measure in the world. Religion is the record of the wishes, desires, and accusations of countless generations” (129).

the meaning of the experience from the self-understanding of the subject who experiences it, the participant in the religious community. Horkheimer thus begins, particularly in his essays on Jewish theology and his addresses to Christian theologians, to root his account of the meaning of theological concepts in relation to the actual self-understanding of a religious community, the subjects of whom comprehend the liturgical practices they participate in as expressing a *response* to redemptive history and an eschatological *anticipation* of the future coming of the day of the Lord. One cannot extricate an interpretation of “human experience” from liturgical claims about what has generated this experience, Horkheimer notes, without thereby offering a qualitatively different account of “experience” itself.

In my investigation of Horkheimer’s essays on the Jewish religion, I noted how his late reflections on the Jewish liturgy are shaped by three practices in particular:

- (1) The *remembrance* of the acts of YHWH in the historical life of the people of Israel. This includes the public recitation of the Psalms and the recollection of the history of Israel, with a particular focus upon the way Israel has been delivered by YHWH from her enemies before the nations. Horkheimer devotes an entire essay, “Psalm 91,” to exploring this theme.
- (2) The *anticipation* of the fulfillment of Israel’s history at the coming of the day of the Lord. This is presented by the prophets, Horkheimer notes in a passage we shall explore below, as a day on which Israel and the righteous of all nations will be vindicated in the face of those who have opposed them.
- (3) The *proleptic participation* in the future day of YHWH through the people’s obedience to the torah. The tension between the realization of the future day, embodied, for instance, in the paradigmatic act of Sabbath-keeping, and the penultimate nature of the present age is kept taut in the mind of the people, Horkheimer notes, through the memory of the stories of the martyrs.⁷

⁷ For a discussion of this three-fold liturgical response to divine action, as well as the dependency of this response on a presentation of redemptive history and eschatology note Chapter 6, section 1.

Horkheimer's account of the three-fold form of the liturgical response to divine action, and his focus on the redemptive-historical and eschatological background that informs this three-fold response, puts his mature work at sharp odds with his early attempt to *extricate* human meaning from religious categories.

Yet in defining the content of religious concepts in precisely this way, he also self-consciously separates himself from those who would attempt to define the response structure of religious concepts apart from a recounting of redemptive history and concrete eschatology, as we noted in our discussion of Horkheimer's critique of Tillich in "Theism and Atheism" and "Psalm 91".⁸ If the concept is shaped as a response to redemptive history and eschatological anticipation, and its response-structure is intimately linked to the meaning the concept continues to have for its users, such removal would change the essential meaning of the concept itself. An important element constituting the "human" significance of such concepts, Horkheimer concludes, far from being extricable from claims about divine action in history, is itself *lost* if the structure of the liturgy as a response to divine action is eclipsed. Instead of moving behind claims regarding the revelation of God in history and the consequent eschatological anticipation of the day of the Lord, to give an account of a more fundamental reality that lies concealed by such language, Horkheimer thus begins to entertain the possibility that such language actually expresses a relationship between humans and the divine.

Horkheimer begins to portray "God," *not* as an idea of pure reason that provides a standpoint apart from empirical reality, but as an agent in the life of a people that is known in the redemptive history and eschatological anticipation which are expressed in the

⁸ For our discussion of various texts wherein Horkheimer critiques Tillich, note Chapter 5, section 2.

liturgical life of the Jewish community. His portrayal of God, precisely because it is a *historically* and *eschatologically* qualified portrayal, is not an appeal to god's eye view, a metaphysical Absolute, as the dominant portrayal supposes.⁹

This understanding of "God" as an agent in history may appear to stand in no little tension with Horkheimer's own examination of apophatic theology. For the latter, at least as Horkheimer portrays it, presents "God" as the unconditioned which cannot be named, whereas the former frames the character of God in relation to God's actions in history. We will return in a moment to examine a proposed resolution to this apparent tension.

2. The purpose of Horkheimer's reflection on the liturgy

In addition to the concept of "God," the dominant portrayal of Horkheimer's turn to theology misunderstands the *purpose* of his appeal to theological categories. It is supposed by interpreters that Horkheimer sets out in his mature work to secure a transcendent standpoint from which oppressive social relations might be critiqued. Yet my research illustrates that critics invert the way Horkheimer's theorizing actually develops. Their critique gains significant traction only so long as it is limited in its object to Horkheimer's early work.

However "non-foundationalist" Horkheimer's early essays on method may have been, it is hard to deny that his initial theorizing supposes a binary opposition between traditional communities (who are the preservers of anachronistic and oppressive societal relationships) and the autonomous subject (who, through the power of inquiry and critique, frees herself from such constraint in the pursuit of self-realization). Both the subject to be realized,

⁹ Cf. Habermas, "To Seek to Salvage," 138, "Horkheimer assumes that there cannot be truth without an Absolute, without a world-transcending power 'in which truth is sublated.'" For a discussion of the passage from which this text is drawn, note the introduction to Chapter 5.

Marx's *homo laborans*, and the traditions that inhibit self-realization, are strikingly uniform. The sympathetic critic may thus suggest that the project Horkheimer sets out to realize by the activity of critique, the self-realization of the subject, itself assumes the idea of a universal human essence that might be released from oppressive societal constraints, thereby relying on "the legacy of a past that could still speak unperturbedly of the nature of human beings."¹⁰

This criticism has the ring of truth, so long as it is applied to Horkheimer's early reflections. Horkheimer's mature work, however, is a less suitable target. For in his later work he abandons the postulate that self-realization *replaces* traditions, and attempts instead to connect "subjectivity" and "self-realization" as concepts to an analysis of how a subject that has lost its naivety about the intuitive plausibility of its tradition might return self-consciously to embrace that tradition. His late thought thus comprehends self-realization, not in relation to a monolithic agent abstracted from every tradition, but rather as the fulfillment of a tradition dependent subject, or perhaps better, the fulfillment of subjects inhabiting diverse traditions.

Self-realization is no longer coupled with the attempt to replace historical traditions (as in the case of his early Marxism), nor is it portrayed as a value pursued by one tradition, such as political liberalism, in competition with others. "Self-realization," according to Horkheimer in his later work, need not be characterized as a caesura, a break with tradition. It may be understood, rather, as the modern subject's successful return to a tradition, in

¹⁰ Axel Honneth, "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism," *Constellations* 7, no. 1 (March 2000): 122. This criticism has indeed been raised about Horkheimer's early writings by sympathetic critics. For instance, note Konstantinos Kavoulakos, "From Habermas to Horkheimer's Early Work: Directions for a Materialist Reconstruction of Communicative Critical Theory," *Telos*, no. 130 (Spring 2005): 150-1.

which the tradition is reinhabited in a form adequate to the subject's self-conception as a modern person. If an ineluctable feature of modern life is the fact that the "givenness" of a tradition for the subject that inhabits it is no longer naively taken for granted, and the subject instead recognizes that her commitment to a tradition is a choice that is not intuitive or self-evident to everyone in her society, Horkheimer wishes to give an account of the successful embrace of a tradition for a subject in this historically unique situation.¹¹ His account specifies how the concepts presented by a tradition may be *reflexively* accepted, not as an intuitive given, but on the basis of experiences the subject has come to recognize as her own.

What Horkheimer attempts to secure in his late work is thus not a standpoint free from empirical social practices, but rather an account of the way a subject may reflexively embrace the practices of her tradition. His purpose is to address the alienation modern subjects feel when categories describing ends-in-themselves that they once took for granted are no longer understood to be self-evident.¹² How might a subject reflexively embrace a tradition and its account of ends after the loss of this naïveté? It is in the context of this attempt to justify the continuing significance of actual historical traditions for the modern

¹¹ This feature of modern life is at the center of recent prominent analyses of our age. For instance, the Charles Taylor notes in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2007) that whereas people in pre-modern societies had a presumptive belief in the existence of God, such that this was their starting point, in modern life this has shifted for many. We no longer live in a time where faith appears self-evident to its adherents.

It is this shift in background, in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness, that I am calling the coming of a secular age.... How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naively within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, in which everyone's construal shows up as such; and in which moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option? This is the transformation that I want to describe, and perhaps also (very partially) explain.... (14)

¹² For a discussion of Horkheimer's analysis of the way subjects' reasoning about ends depends upon communal practices learned in a tradition and his diagnosis of why such traditions are no longer accepted as self-evident to those who inhabit them, note in particular Chapter 4, section 3.

subject that the importance of the liturgy, and what we have termed “liturgical reasoning,” becomes a central preoccupation for Horkheimer. I will first describe what I have termed Horkheimer’s conception of “liturgical reasoning” and then explain his understanding of how such reasoning helps the modern subject to reflexively embrace to her tradition.

Horkheimer’s late reflections on the liturgy are not, it should be emphasized, concerned with the kinds of instrumental reasons one might offer for achieving taken for granted ends-in-themselves. That is, it is not his concern to relate the practice of the liturgy to pragmatic reflection regarding the best way to realize an already taken for granted end. Rather, his reflections address the most basic reasons a person may offer to justify her understanding of what an end-in-itself like justice must entail. His concern is thus with the role of the liturgy in shaping what we have termed “reflective” (as opposed to “theoretical”) reasoning.¹³

He recognizes that without the accounts rehearsed and woven together into a cogent whole by the liturgical practices of a community, the self-understanding and thus the reasoning of agents regarding ends-in-themselves is impossible.¹⁴ This recognition is not, of course, unique to him. For instance, the notion that human reasoning about ends is fundamentally shaped by the historical self-understanding of agents, and is thus dependent upon the narratives religious communities rehearse in the liturgy, is a centerpiece of post-liberal theological discussion.¹⁵ Yet, Horkheimer suggests, further, that the liturgy of a

¹³ For an explanation of this distinction between faculties and a description of how it operates in Horkheimer’s work, note in particular Chapter 3, section 2.

¹⁴ Note Chapter 4, section 3 for an analysis of the relevant texts in *Eclipse of Reason* where he makes this claim.

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas has argued that liturgical practices in the Christian community are central to the formation of the Christian subject and thereby to the specific loci of ethics. Each chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), which he edited, thus centers on an aspect or feature of the Christian liturgy. In explaining this method Hauerwas notes, in an introductory essay co-authored with Samuel Wells, “Christian Ethics as Informed Prayer,” that

community is not simply the *carrier* that preserves the narrative material which will be used by reasoning agents to license inferences about ends. It is also a practice that can itself therapeutically address the subject's loss of naïveté about such ends. For according to Horkheimer, the liturgy itself implies a way of reasoning about ends.¹⁶ It does not simply preserve a repository of descriptions that are useful for reasoning; it exemplifies a way subjects should reason.

The liturgy is a practice wherein the historical experience and eschatological anticipation that constitute reasons for a community's acceptance of ends-in-themselves are rehearsed back to the community. It is thus not merely a *reservoir* of description; it serves as a *mirror* that expresses the historical relationship between experience, anticipation, and the conceptualization of ends-in-themselves. Or put otherwise, the liturgy makes explicit a relationship that otherwise remains intuitive or implicit in the subjects' naïve acceptance of ends-in-themselves, and thereby it exemplifies a form of inter-subjective reason giving about why ends which are held by the community are acceptable to those who embrace them. Once reflexively grasped, this relationship between experience and concept may in turn be related to the ongoing experiences of subjects, so that concepts may be reformulated or built anew in relation to this experience. Thus modern subjects may come to embrace the claims of a tradition in a reflexive way.

"The liturgy offers ethics a series of ordered practices that shape the character and assumptions of Christians and suggest habits and models that inform every aspect of corporate life" (7). Thus, "The overall objective [of this volume on ethics] is to take worship from being a curiosity in ethical discussion to being considered so significant that it is taken for granted in every debate and permitted to generate questions that shape the whole discipline" (10).

¹⁶ For an examination of the texts that demonstrate the way that the liturgy makes explicit the connections between ends-in-themselves and the reasons subjects have for taking such ends as their own, note chapter 6, section 1. For an example of the way the liturgy facilitates the development of the concept of "justice" through the practice of reflective reasoning, note section 2.1. The following draws from and develops the analysis presented there.

Horkheimer takes as an example of this reflexive process the way the intensified historical experience of persecution in exile affected the intuitive use of theological concepts in the Jewish community. The question the experience of exile raised for the Jewish community, he notes, was whether it was possible to subsume the historical experience of suffering-in-exile under already existing theological categories, as if the only question in such matters for the faithful was the proper application of the taken for granted categories learned in the liturgy to new experience. The reconstruction of categories and not merely the subsumption of experience under existing categories, was necessary, Horkheimer notes, because as the suffering of the people reached a particularly egregious and qualitatively distinct point, a decisive challenge was issued by this experience to already existing categories themselves. At one point in the history of the Jewish people, it might have been enough to describe suffering as YHWH's "just" retribution on unrighteousness, rather than to countenance the idea that YHWH had abandoned his followers. Yet this theological account of divine providence required that the experience of suffering be subsumed under the category of retributive justice. This subsumption ceased to appear to subjects who experienced unjust suffering in exile.

The challenge to theological categories, however, did not lead finally to the diremption of the categories themselves, or the abandonment of the tradition, but rather to an attempt to reconstruct the categories of the tradition in relation to the contemporary experience of the people. This, notes Horkheimer, produced a faithful improvisation: YHWH would prove faithful in preserving eternal Israel corporately as a witness among the nations, despite the wrongful suffering of the individual martyr. Indeed, the suffering one who remained faithful to YHWH lived on in the memory of the people and would one day be

vindicated at the coming of the day of the Lord. The reconceptualization of the death of the Jew in exile as “martyrdom” instead of “punishment,” as a righteous witness to the coming day of the Lord instead of as the justified object of wrath, and the connection of this suffering to the continued preservation of eternal Israel instead of simply to the justified demise of the wicked one, all of these improvisations in the Jewish tradition were ways of reconceptualizing divine activity using resources already existing within the tradition. Yet this new synthesis took on a distinct force and necessity in the face of the unique absurdity of suffering in exile. Such reconceptualization described the qualitatively “new” using resources that were resident in a tradition. Yet it equally required, in some sense, the qualitatively new historical experience, as the precipitating factor in the appreciation and use of these resources.

This reconceptualization may be understood as a practice of reflective reasoning, insofar as it seeks to reformulate concepts of a particular end-in-itself (divine justice) using resources that are native to the tradition in question, in response to the genuinely new. Such reasoning is able to proceed, Horkheimer notes, when participants in a tradition have a reflexive awareness of the relationship between the categories they use and their experience, so that the latter is not merely subsumed by, but may *disrupt*, the former. Liturgy displays this relationship to participants in a tradition, insofar as it requires participants to relate their taken for granted categories to historical and contemporary experience. Thus it may rightly be understood as a condition for the possibility of reflective reasoning for members within a tradition.

But Horkheimer argues, further, that the liturgy is not merely a condition for the possibility of such reasoning, but itself implies a way of reasoning about ends. For the

liturgy brings theological categories into juxtaposition with historical and contemporary experiences, situating concepts in relation to the experience which informs their use. This suggests not merely that concepts interpret experience but that they must be reconstructed in the face of disruption when they fail to do justice to this experience. Liturgical reasoning preserves concepts like justice which characterize the fundamental commitments of participants in a form of life, without forfeiting the awareness that such theological categories are a conditioned *response* to historical experience. It thus models for subjects how they can inhabit traditions in a reflexive way, accepting or reformulating the ends presented by those traditions in relation to their experience on the basis of their judgment.

Apophatic theology, notes Horkheimer, self-consciously articulates the responsive structure of such reflective reasoning to experience. Its purpose is to draw attention to the way theological concepts are related to the situated subject, and it holds forth both the truth of such concepts for a people *and* their historical dependency on the developing experience of subjects. By noting that concepts about the unconditioned are themselves historically situated, such reflection holds forth the possibility that the genuinely *novel* historical experience will shed light upon the adequacy and meaning of theological concepts, allowing the rearticulation of a tradition without the abstract negation of concepts themselves, or the mere repetition of past uses of the concept. In this regard, apophatic theology articulates the necessarily open relation between conceptualizations regarding the intelligible that arise on the basis of historical experience (i.e. the experiences of redemptive history), and the ongoing experience of subjects in a tradition that qualifies and reconstructs such concepts.¹⁷

¹⁷ For an analysis of Horkheimer's writings on apophatic theology as they relate to his reflections on the liturgical formation of concepts, note Chapter 6, section 2.2.

Previously, it was noted that Horkheimer's presentation of "God" as an agent in history appeared to stand in no little tension with the idea expressed in his apophatic theology that "God" is an unconditioned which may not be named. Now we are in a position to return to this tension and propose a resolution on the basis of Horkheimer's concern to relate the truth of theological concepts to history. Far from postulating an "unknown" intelligible, it may be noted that apophatic reflection, by refusing to equate human concepts with an unconditioned standing beyond history, displays precisely the open-ended willingness to reformulate concepts that *must* characterize a tradition intent upon affirming that the truth content of its concepts is intimately related to an ongoing historical disclosure of the divine in history, which cannot be known a-priori apart from historical development.

Having addressed two mistakes interpreters make in interpreting Horkheimer's approach to theological concepts, I will conclude by noting how his understanding of the public significance of such concepts provides a preferable alternative to the way religious traditions are related to public reasoning in Habermas' recent reflections on the philosophy of religion.

3. The public status of religious claims

What is striking about Horkheimer's mature work is not only his insistence that modern subjects will not reach self-satisfaction without returning to historical traditions, nor his resistance to attempts to extricate theological concepts from the response structure of the liturgy, but the further claim, in contradistinction to his early Marxist attempt to "extricate" the rational human content of religion from its supposedly mythical entrapment, that such concepts must continue to play a role in public reasoning *as theological concepts*, informing

modern public discourse about social ends-in-themselves.¹⁸ The central question his mature work raises is why public concepts of ends should retain their reference to theology at all, shaped as theology is by the particular history and anticipations rehearsed in liturgical practices. Put otherwise, Horkheimer's mature work challenges the idea that the closer one moves towards accounts of redemptive history and eschatological anticipation as these are developed in the life of a particular community, the farther one moves from anything resembling a 'public' argument. His way of conceiving of reasoning, I shall argue, offers an account of the role theological premises play in public reasoning that is preferable to the present model offered by second-generation critical theorists.

Horkheimer's early critique of the positivist dismissal of religious concepts as meaningless is not unique among Frankfurt School theorists, who focus on describing the rational content of religious concepts as expressions of human need and value.¹⁹ In his recent reflections on secularism, the method of such theorists is summarized cogently by Jürgen Habermas, when he notes, "Philosophy has repeatedly learned through its encounters with religious traditions...that it receives innovative impulses when it succeeds in freeing cognitive contents from their dogmatic encapsulation in the crucible of rational discourse."²⁰ Habermas supposes in this description that it possible to free the "cognitive" or "rational" meaning of religious concepts from a "dogmatic" reference to divine activity.

¹⁸ For the development of Horkheimer's argument that concepts of the intelligible, and the aesthetic and practical judgments such concepts allow, are dependent upon the social practices of particular religious traditions, note Chapter 4, section 3 and Chapter 5, section 1.

¹⁹ In the titular essay of *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age*, tr. Ciaran Cronin (Malden, Cambridge: 2010), 18, Habermas explicitly rejects a "blinkered enlightenment which is unenlightened about itself and which denies religion any rational content." This critique of the dismissal of religious concepts characterizes the work of many members of the school as Eduardo Mendieta notes in his overview, "Religion as Critique: Theology as Social Critique and Enlightened Reason," in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8-11.

²⁰ Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the 'Public Use of Reason' by Religious and Secular Citizens," in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 142.

In stating the argument in this manner, he, like the early Horkheimer, places himself in a broader Enlightenment tradition that understands religious concepts as expressive of human existential states, the universal social meaning of which is veiled from the subjects who use them by their supposed religious meaning. As we shall see, Habermas wishes to modify this hermeneutical tradition in the face of criticisms from members of religious traditions, who object to the way it disregards their own self-understanding of what they are doing when they employ such concepts. Yet he wishes to do so without altering the fundamental notion that the content of such concepts may be extricated from dogmatic claims regarding the divine.

Habermas' philosophy of religion has a Janus-faced relationship to the practice of actually existing religions traditions, insofar as it recognizes itself as both their *fulfillment* and *negation*. From a formal perspective, the replacement of mythical narratives by a rational, "law-based," account of the functioning of natural and social life is understood by Habermas as the pinnacle of a form of reasoning begun by historical religious traditions themselves. Thus, "mosaic monotheism," he notes, facilitated "the cognitive advance from *mythos* to *logos*," for it "made it possible to take a synoptic view of the world as a whole from a transcendent point of view and to distinguish the flood of phenomena from the underlying essences."²¹ From this perspective, the modern project of extricating the

²¹ Habermas, "Awareness of What is Missing," 17. Elsewhere, in "'The Political': The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Square*, eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 18-19, he notes more concretely that monotheistic conceptions of a divine *nomos* enabled individuals to differentiate human rulers from a law to which they should be held accountable, opening up the possibility for prophetic critique. "Once this transformation has taken place the political ruler can no longer be perceived as the manifestation of the divine but only as its human *representative*. From now on, he, as a human person, is also *subordinated* to the *nomos* in terms of which all human action must be measured."

“rational” core of religious rituals from their “mythic” trappings is merely a late flowering *inheritance* of a practice of thinking shaped by earlier religious traditions.²²

Yet if there is a sense in which the modern practice of demythologizing brings to fulfillment a project begun by monotheism, it is equally the case that this project breaks sharply with the self-understanding of members of the monotheistic traditions. For modern demythologizing was first formulated by modern social theorists as a *critique* of the self-understanding of members of such communities. Habermas recognizes that the hard edge of methodological naturalism implicit in this account, which equates the underlying “rational” essence of religious concepts with human states and relegates the divine reference of such language to “mythical” ephemera, is hardly reflective of the self-understanding of members of historical religious communities.²³

Thus, in his recent attempts to dialogue with Catholic philosophers about the relationship between religious traditions and reasoning, he offers a subtle modification of this method. Secular theorists, he notes, may not judge the validity of the claims of religious communities regarding the divine. Strong assertions like, “religious claims about the divine in actuality express human experience” are unacceptable. When this claim is simply assumed a-priori as the basis for demythologization it becomes as speculative as claims

²² Habermas concludes this explicitly in “Faith and Knowledge,” trans. Helen Beister and William Rehy, in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 335, “[Profane reason] knows that the profanation of the sacred begins with those world religions which disenchanted magic, overcame myth, sublimated sacrifice, and disclosed the secret...Postsecular society continues the work, for religion itself, that religion did for myth.”

²³ In an instructive aside in “Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State,” in *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 42, he thus notes, “The respect that accompanies [the] refusal to utter a cognitive judgment [about the content of religious concepts] is based on the respect due to persons and ways of life that obviously derive their integrity and authenticity from religious convictions.”

religious interlocutors may advance about the supernatural. Thus, Habermas concludes in a Kantian vein, “secular reason may not set itself up as the judge concerning truths of faith.”²⁴

A strong version of methodological naturalism which attempts to judge what part of a religious claim may be considered “true” and what part “false,” in order to determine finally the unalloyed meaning of such claims, is replaced by Habermas with an account of features that *any* public appeal to an interlocutor about the truth content of a claim must possess. Indeed, he explicitly distinguishes this account from the aforementioned strong version of naturalism, “this act of drawing the grammatical borders does not make a philosophical claim to determine what...may be true or false in the contents of a religious tradition.”²⁵ Rather than looking at whether and in what sense religious claims are true or false, he wishes to examine the necessary conditions under which any such claims may be made intelligible to a modern audience. Thus Habermas notes, “The truth of religious validity claims is not in question here, but rather the potentially translatable *truth content* of religious utterances.”²⁶

The premises of his argument are as follows:

(1): Three features of modern life are taken for granted by “religious” and “non-religious” persons when they reason together in public. These features are:

(a): “the secularization of knowledge,”

(b): “the neutralization of the state authorities” with regard to the practice of religion,

²⁴ Habermas, “Awareness of What is Missing,” 16. In “Pre-political Foundations,” 51, Habermas concludes that naturalist convictions have in common with religious world views the fact that they “owe their genesis to a *speculative* assimilation of scientific information.” Thus, in the political arena, they “do not in the least enjoy a *prima facie* advantage over competing world views or religious understandings.”

²⁵ Habermas, “Pre-political Foundations,” 42.

²⁶ Habermas “The Political,” 32, n. 22.

(c): “the universalization of religious freedom.”²⁷

(2): These features necessarily constrain the intelligibility of religious claims in the public square.

The second two features (b-c) are portrayed by Habermas as related elements of a classically liberal political order (though one can, of course, imagine [c] without [b] and we shall return to this). They express an official neutrality towards diverse religious beliefs, as well as protection of the freedom of conscious. Habermas further defines (a) “the secularization of knowledge” as the fact that there are “universally accessible discourses” in modern society, which he specifies as “the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality.”²⁸ Both the exercise of theoretical reason in the sciences and that of practical reason in law and morality, he concludes, are based on “the authority of ‘natural’ reason,”²⁹ which he defines as reason “that relies exclusively on public arguments that claim to be *equally accessible* to *all* persons.”³⁰ These universal discourses, notes Habermas, have significantly limited the direct role religious language plays in public discourse.³¹

²⁷ Habermas, “Pre-political Foundations,” 48.

²⁸ Habermas, “An Awareness of What is Missing,” 16. In “Faith and Knowledge,” 329, he notes,

Religious consciousness must first, come to terms with the cognitive dissonance of encountering other denominations and religions [i.e. it must accept “the neutralization of the state authorities, and the universalization of religious freedom”]. It must, second, adapt to the authority of the sciences which hold the societal monopoly of secular knowledge [i.e. it must accept “the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences”]. It must, last, agree to the premises of a constitutional state grounded in profane morality [i.e. it must accept “the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality”].

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 120, emphasis his.

³¹ Habermas, “Prepolitical Foundations,” 48, “With the functional differentiation of social subsystems, the life of the religious fellowship also becomes separated from the social milieus in which it exists. The role of the fellowship member is differentiated from that of the citizen of society.”

Habermas notes that the recognition of (a) - (c) requires a qualitative shift away from the claims of religious traditions to structure public life and towards another more basic structural principle, the requirements of reason, themselves deduced from an examination of the formal qualities of the communicative act.

In its origins, every religion is a “world view” or a “comprehensive doctrine” in the sense that it claims authority to give structure to an entire way of life. Under conditions created by the secularization of knowledge, the neutralization of the state authorities, and the universalization of religious freedom, religion was compelled to abandon this claim to a monopoly on interpretation and to a comprehensive structuring of human life.³²

He also claims that the more basic structural principle, the formal requirements of reason as these are revealed in the communicative act, provide “a stock of arguments that are independent of religious and metaphysical traditions.”³³

Religious persons come to accept (a) insofar as they present public claims in a form which accords with the “universally accessible discourses” of science and morality. Translation is thus integral to participating in public life for the religious person, for without it the religious believer is appealing to warrants that her fellow citizens will not recognize as binding. In a modern society, religious persons are, of course, free to use “religious language” in public. But if they wish to present *reasons* for societal action to others, then they must translate such language into the *lingua franca* of the universally accessible discourses. As Habermas puts it,

All citizens should be free to decide whether they want to use religious language in the public sphere. Were they to do so, they would, however, have to accept that the potential truth contents of religious utterances must be translated into a generally

³² Habermas, “Pre-political Foundations,” 48.

³³ Ibid., 29.

accessible language before they can find their way onto the agendas or parliaments, courts, or administrative bodies and influence their decisions.³⁴

It might be objected that this requirement imposes an undue burden on the religious; the nonreligious, after all, are not required to translate their fundamental commitments.³⁵

However, Habermas argues that there is an obligation arising from these requirements for *both* the religious and non-religious alike.

For the religious, adaptation to (a)-(c) ought not be seen as a matter of mere accommodation, but should be accepted *ex animo* on the basis of reasons internal to the religious tradition itself. Thus Habermas notes,

Instead of grudging accommodation to externally imposed constraints, the content of religion must open itself up to the normatively grounded expectation that it should recognize *for reasons of its own* the neutrality of the state towards worldviews, the equal freedom of all religious communities, and the independence of the institutionalized sciences.³⁶

The task for the theologian is thus to reflect upon a properly *theological* justification for state neutrality, toleration, and the autonomy of natural reason which is necessary to translation.

As an example of a religious account of translation, Habermas cites “the Catholic tradition” which “is comfortable with the *lumen naturale*” and “has no problem in principle with an autonomous justification of morality and law.”³⁷

³⁴ Habermas, “The ‘Political,’” 25-26. Habermas thus notes that religious people have the right to formulate and “justify” their stances “in the political arena” using reasons particular to the beliefs of their religious community. However, these reasons must be translated into “a worldview-neutral language” if they are to be proposed as reasons for a policy by those in an official governing capacity (“Awareness of What is Missing,” 21).

³⁵ Habermas acknowledges this in “Faith and Knowledge,” 332, “The democratic common sense insists on reasons which are acceptable not just for members of *one* religious community. Therefore, the liberal state makes believers suspect that occidental secularization might be a one-way street bypassing religion as marginal.”

³⁶ Habermas, “Awareness of What is Missing,” 21, my emphasis. Cf. Habermas, “Religious Tolerance as a Pacemaker for Cultural Rights,” in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 261-262, “The major religions must reappropriate the normative foundations of the liberal state *on their own premises* even if, as in the case of the Judeo-Christian legacy in Europe, a genealogical connection exists between the two.”

³⁷ Habermas, “Pre-political Foundations,” 25.

For the non-religious, translation requires they take seriously the reasons given by the religious on the basis of their particular beliefs, not dismissing them out of hand as nonsense but working together with the religious to translate possible “suppressed or untapped moral intuitions” contained in religious belief into the *lingua franca*.³⁸ Given “the religious origins” of Western society, it may be the case that resources from this inheritance will cast light on societal issues and require translation into a universally understood form.³⁹ Habermas thus notes.

For secular citizens, the same ethics of citizenship entails a complementary burden. By the duty of reciprocal accountability toward all citizens, including religious ones, they are obliged not to publicly dismiss religious contributions to political opinion and will formation as mere noise, or even nonsense, from the start.⁴⁰

Thus, according to Habermas, translation is a two-sided endeavor, “which requires *both* sides to take on the perspective of the other.”⁴¹ That Habermas counsels from the religious the *relinquishment* of the world-formative character of their claims, while counseling the non-religious to *aid* them in this with civility, casts doubt on whether the burdens placed on both are really of the same kind. I shall return to this momentarily.

Habermas concludes that he has replaced a “strong” version of methodological naturalism, a version which extricates or “filters” the rational core from the non-rational

³⁸ Habermas, “The Political,” 27. At the conclusion of the essay, Habermas calls this the “recovery of semantic potentials from religious traditions for the wider political culture.”

³⁹ See Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” 333.

⁴⁰ Habermas, “The Political,” 26. In “Faith and Knowledge,” 332, he similarly notes, “Only if the secular side, too, remains sensitive to the force of articulation inherent in religious languages will the search for reasons that aim at universal acceptability not lead to an unfair exclusion of religions from the public sphere, nor sever secular society from important resources of meaning.”

⁴¹ Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” 332, his emphasis.

mythic elements of religion in an a-priori manner, with a method that merely “redirects the flow of tradition” so that it can reenter public life in a universally accessible form.⁴²

Yet both of these moves, the claim that a religion must relinquish its self-conception as a comprehensive doctrine, and the idea that the common stock of reasons which replaces religion and structures modern life can be freed of “religious” and “metaphysical” baggage, are hardly innocuous.

First, it is worth noting that religious traditions did not require modern pluralism to make them aware of the need to translate their truth claims into a language that outsiders could understand, even during the historical moment when, according to Habermas, they conceived of themselves as providing a “comprehensive doctrine” that structured public life. The Christian tradition itself, in its account of the natural law, provides an understanding of “translation,” in comparison to which Habermas’ own account is revealed to be less neutral than he would suppose. I shall develop this claim by reexamining Habermas’ account of the constants defining modern life (1a-c). Then I will note how Horkheimer’s mature thoughts on religion offer an alternative account of the relationship between religious premises and public reasoning, without relying on the questionable idea that religious premises should lose their comprehensive status in favor of Habermas’ account of communicative reason.

Let us begin by noting that (c), “the universalization of religious freedom,” is a project which may in fact be pursued by individuals on the basis of reasons internal to their own religious traditions, without necessarily entailing the activity of translation (as Habermas

⁴² Habermas, “Awareness of What’s Missing,” 18, “Secularization functions less as a filter separating out the contents of traditions than as a transformer which redirects the flow of tradition.” His version of secularism, he concludes, provides a basis for respectful exchanges with communities of faith. “The mode for *nondestructive secularization* is translation” (“Faith and Knowledge,” 336).

notes in his own historical reflections on how religious liberty arose in America⁴³). In the case of the American experiment, persecution due to the coupling of state power with church authority prompted individuals within a religious tradition to reflect upon their own concept of freedom of conscious. Thus (c) does not require the “abandonment” of the claim of religious world views to provide a “comprehensive structuring of human life.” Nor does it require for its implementation the activity of “translation” into a stock of reasons common to all. One can conceive, for instance, of a public polity wherein the majority is self-consciously committed to a Christian world view, yet whose commitment to such entails toleration towards religious minorities.

It is, in fact, (a) “the secularization of knowledge” that requires translation as well as theological justifications “internal” to a tradition which can motivate such translation. The supposition that a common stock of reasons underlies translation then raises the possibility that (b) “the neutralization of the state authorities” is possible, such that a state may act on reasons which are not rooted in premises that are particular to religious traditions.

Habermas cites the *lumen naturale* as an instance of a theological basis for the translation work of (a). This presents an instructive ambiguity. When speaking of the natural law, theologians certainly recognize that reason may proceed on premises drawn solely from observations all humans may have, thus not by direct appeal to propositions which will only be acceptable to those within a particular religious community. Yet they do not draw the conclusion from this that reason is “autonomous,” at least in the sense that Habermas suggests. The very ability to infer from the observation of nature is a gift of God, and the capacity for reason to outline the laws behind natural processes may only occur because

⁴³ Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 118.

there is an intelligibility to creation that reflects the mind who has created. There is thus, for the natural lawyer, a religious reason that is properly basic (i.e. it may not itself be translated) underlying the Christian account of the condition for the possibility of translation into universally accessible discourses. The theologian may, of course, concede that subjects can use reason without appealing to such theological premises, but not that they may *account for* such natural use in a way that brackets questions regarding the existence of God as a giver of gifts and an intelligent mind.⁴⁴

This illustrates two problems with Habermas' account. First, he presents the idea of "translation" as if it were enabled by the same "universal discourses" that replaced religion as purveyors of a comprehensive world view. This, however, is hardly self-evident to those in religious communities. Habermas is correct that many have an account of translation which may be justified by appeal to religious convictions. But he is wrong to assume that this entails any easy acceptance of the autonomy of the translation process from religious convictions. In the case of the aforementioned natural lawyer, there is a belief that both "universal discourses" as well as the translations they allow are only possible *because of* truths affirmed by a "comprehensive" religious world view. Far from displacing the public status of religion, for the natural lawyer translation supposes it. Instead of determining a-priori

⁴⁴ Benedict XVI notes as much in a response to Habermas found in his famous address, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections" (lecture presented at the University of Regensburg, September 12 2006), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html,

Modern scientific reason quite simply has to accept the rational structure of matter and the correspondence between our spirit and the prevailing rational structures of nature as a given, on which its methodology has to be based. Yet the question why this has to be so is a real question, and one which has to be remanded by the natural sciences to other modes and planes of thought - to philosophy and theology.

the content of religious concepts, Habermas moves the conflict to a different level by determining a-priori the basis for the possibility of translation. Yet the conflict remains: the idea that the believer should relinquish her tradition as a “comprehensive doctrine” in favor of the formal requirements of reason understood as an inter-subjective communicative act hardly escapes the a-priori assertion of naturalism that Habermas rightly originally wished to avoid when approaching dialogue with religious communities.

Habermas understands the pattern of reasoning that occurs within religious communities as parochial. Let us take the case of practical reason as an example. Members of a community draw inferences that move:

(a): from experiences which are *particular to their community*, such as, for instance, the remembrance of particular divine acts of salvation in history (we shall call these “tradition-specific” experiences),

(b): to a set of practical rules for their own activity.

For instance, for the faithful Jew, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” recalls a tradition-specific experience remembered in liturgical rites like Passover. This tradition-specific experience warrants a practical rule, “You shall have no other gods before me.”⁴⁵ This rule will not necessarily be accepted or understood by those outside of the community of faith, insofar as they do not recognize the authority of the tradition-specific experience that licenses the practical conclusion.

For Habermas, the rule “You shall have no other gods before me” will be understandable only for those within the closed circle of the community. For practical rules to be rational to a broader public, one must appeal to experiences that exist, or theoretically

⁴⁵ Exodus 20:2-3.

could possibly exist, for all subjects regardless of the traditions they inhabit (we shall call these “shared” experiences). Such shared experiences must then be reflected upon using rules that are not-tradition specific (i.e. “universal discourses”).

This raises the second difficulty. A conclusion drawn from premises that are based on “shared” not “tradition-specific” experiences does not itself ensure that the conclusion will be unencumbered by the inferential moves licensed by a tradition. Traditions in actuality inform reasoning from “tradition-specific” experiences *and* “shared” experiences alike.

For the natural lawyer, experiences may indeed be “shared” by all, but the conclusions drawn from this common stock of experiences would not necessarily be self-evident to all. The natural lawyer is guided by a history of philosophical reflection on teleology in nature which is congruent with the narratives particular to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. She would hold that her conclusions, *ex hypothesai*, could be recognized by all, should they have the intellectual and moral stature and formation to do so. But the conclusions drawn are not themselves intuitive. They are aided by a tradition of inquiry and recourse to the Scriptures and thus are indirectly reliant upon a religious tradition. This illustrates that the relation of religious traditions and reasoning is more complicated than Habermas assumes. It is not, after all, the scope of the experience reflected upon that distinguishes religious reasoning from reasoning based on universal discourses, but rather differences in the “universal” laws that the natural lawyer and the critical philosopher employ.

Reasoning from “shared” experiences to practical maxims will inevitably be informed by a tradition of reflection that situates the “universal” rules employed, whether this exemplified by Aristotle and Aquinas or more recent theorists like Kant. The conclusions that result from this will also be shaped by such traditions. Habermas may speak of the

lumen naturale as if it were equivalent to the idea of autonomous reason. But the more there are open questions between critical theorists and natural lawyers regarding what counts as a “shared experience” determined by a rule and what “universal” rules to employ (as there undoubtedly will be on controverted issues such as homosexuality and abortion), the more the implicit way that traditions of reflection have shaped reasoning about “shared” experience come into play. In moments like this, the indirect and implicit role of tradition in shaping public reasoning needs to be *made explicit*. This is not to say that there are not such things as “shared” experiences or “universal rules” which when reflected upon may license practical action across traditions; it is only to recognize that reflection on the role of traditions of inquiry in shaping reasoning about such experiences will need to become *publicly explicit* in order for progress to be made in clarifying and extending these rules.

When too little agreement exists regarding “shared” experiences and universal “rules” to allow consensus between traditions, it is necessary, not to abstract from the “tradition-specific” reasons which members of religions traditions have for holding their convictions in favor of an account that has no genetic relation to the historical practices that have shaped reasoning, but rather to *make explicit* how historical traditions influence an analysis of “shared” experience, so that participants can empathetically inhabit the perspective of their interlocutor and learn to reason with them regarding controverted questions. Consensus in such situations should be understood as presenting a practical task to be accomplished, not a theoretical difficulty that can be resolved *a-priori* by formal standards known apart from any tradition.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ I am indebted for this point to Nicholas Adams. I concur with his suggestion in *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 238, that “Taking religious discourses seriously...may be a condition for good-quality argument in the public sphere, not an obstacle to it.”

Second generation critical theory, in its desire to provide a set of tradition independent criteria for resolving conflict, disengages traditions at just this crucial point, leading one sympathetic critic to note rightly,

Critical theorists begin by embracing the hope that genuinely democratic discourse will flourish among us. They set out to serve this hope by systematically diagnosing the sources of distortion that arise within our discourse as it is. But they end up by explaining away, instead of entering into conversation with, nearly everything that real people think, say, and feel.⁴⁷

In the case we have been exploring, the point at which actual traditions speak up publicly about the reasons they have for interpreting “shared” experiences the way they have come to interpret them is precisely the point at which such traditions are told to be silent and to offer up the claim of their religion to “comprehensively structure” life.

Yet, in the face of such disagreement one needs, it seems to me, a conception of public reasoning that does not limit discussion regarding the way religious (and secular) traditions alike inform and influence descriptions of experiences and rules which inform common life. This should not be coupled with attempts by the state to *require* the acceptance of a particular religious tradition, (b) and (c) may in fact be decoupled as I note above, yet it does require that public officials in a pluralist polity be allowed to discuss how traditions shape their understanding, and it recognizes explicitly that interpretations of ends can owe a debt to religious traditions.

Neither the mere existence of “shared” experiences, nor the structuring of public life around universal discourses that reflect upon such experiences, require the thesis that universal discourses or the consequent public life they foster must (or indeed *can*) be free of

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 178.

the influence of tradition. If this is so, then we should hesitate before limiting public exchange when addressing issues where differences between traditions matter.

Horkheimer's account of the relation of the liturgy to reflective reasoning about ends describes a way that the implicit premises which shape such differences may come to light and be made explicit. Noting the way concepts of public ends are historically and eschatologically qualified by the "tradition specific" experiences of a community opens up the reasoning of members of a community to self-reflective examination, as well as the examination of outsiders. Such recognition is crucial to inculcating reflexivity amongst those inhabiting religious traditions, as well as empathy amongst those who do not.⁴⁸ Yet we need not treat this inside/outside distinction as final. For as Horkheimer's description of the reconstruction of theological concepts in the face of exile illustrates, the theologian who relates redemptive history to the present moment in the life of the people situates "tradition specific" experience vis-à-vis wider patterns of "shared" experience in the life of a society as a whole. Horkheimer's turn towards liturgical reasoning both suggests how implicit theological commitments which inform subjects accounts of the common good may be made explicit and may be opened up to concrete challenge and reconstruction from outwith the community of faith.

Horkheimer recognizes how the liturgies of traditions affect "public" reasoning about taken for granted universal discourses, such as morality and the sciences. If I am correct that what is needed in the case of public conflict over morality (to take the case of practical reasoning) is not the requirement that the religious cede the world-formative power of their

⁴⁸ Stout notes suggestively in *Democracy and Tradition*, 177, "The respect we have for one another need not be a purely abstract regard for potential rational agency. It tends in fact to be much more specific than that. It is nourished by our recognition that much of what our neighbors believe is what any reasonable person would believe if situated in exactly the same way they are."

belief in favor of a tradition-free vantage point, but rather that either side in the disagreement make more explicit the tradition specific reasons they have for disagreeing with one another, then returning to Horkheimer's mature account of the relationship between reasoning and the liturgy may be a worthwhile task for critical theorists who wish to reason with religious traditions.

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